

DRAG



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DRAG

A NOVEL

By

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D R A G

CHAPTER I

"INNOCENCE ABROAD"

They made their first appearance in our twenty-dollar-a-week, picket-fence-and-hitching-post town of Paris, Vermont, on a singing June morning in 1907. A small, dapple-gray mare pulling the high-wheeled mud-buggy in which they rode, trotted briskly through the long covered bridge over the Green River, crossed the Vermont Central tracks by the Process Works and came down East Main Street as our local merchants were splashing their windows for the Trade-Here-and-Save-Money activities of another summer's day.

The boy drove the mare. On the seat beside him sat the girl. And three times before they had penetrated the community as far as the curve by the Baptist Church, the rig had been recognized as the property of old Jeff Turner who ran the livery in Foxboro Center, twenty miles eastward over the mountains.

He was a boy of twenty years; the girl appeared younger. Both sat stiff and erect in the noisy old buggy whose steel tires slurred constantly in the Main Street car tracks. Scarcely a dozen sentences had passed between them since the lad had overtaken her carrying a heavy telescope valise on the west side of Cobb Hill, seven miles out of town.

He was an open-mouthed, hay-barn-scented type of boy who must have left Foxboro long before daybreak to make the trip. His pin-feathered countenance had never been reddened by a razor. The muscles of dominant maturity were still faint and flaccid along his jaw. He looked fresh, untried and clean — the type of home-grown, corn-fed, hill-raised youngster who travels forth to seek his fortune with a twenty-dollar banknote hidden in the leaves of mother's Bible, Lincoln as his patron saint, a beautifully barbered head, mud on his shoes — and a constitutional conviction that any community of more than ten thousand souls must be a Sodom of sin and a Gomorrah of guile.

He wore an oversized derby hat and an undersized suit of clothes. The coat was too long in the sleeves and the trousers too short in the legs. His collar was white with the shimmer of celluloid; his necktie — a factory-fashioned four-in-hand as crimson and arresting as blood — held a headless pin deep in its folds to keep the monstrosity from turning up, unexpected and unwanted, in his soup. On his feet were self-evident shoes, built for comfort if not for speed and chiefly notable for an unerring propensity to upset objects when their wearer entered rooms. The principal fabric in the suit was cotton; at some time or other the rain had divulged it. When new it had cost twelve dollars. The rain had divulged that also.

As far from him in the seat as she could comfortably hold herself, the girl rode down East Main Street beside this boy, tiny feet on the telescope valise, hands clasped primly together on shapely knees, slate-gray eyes staring straight ahead — except when they furtively glanced at his boyish profile and then whisked as quickly away — delightful snub nose held painfully high.

A diminutive, determined, very respectable little person, she desired the world to accept her, with a figure such as sculptors give to delectable statuettes. A blue serge shoulder cape hid much of her dainty buff frock; its hood fell away from a head of fine-spun chestnut hair in which the morning sun played riotously. That hair was drawn back softly from its pompadour to a cascade of ringlets down her pretty back, gathered at the nape of her neck by a jeweled barrette.

"My name's Carrie Flynt and I'm going down to Paris to act as companion for an elderly lady. I may later become a nurse," she had announced by way of explanation, after accepting the boy's invitation to enter the buggy.

"And mine's David Haskell. And I'm going down to Paris to work in the newspaper office and become a journalist," he had responded with color.

"Then we're both starting our life-work the same day and morning. It's funny we should meet so, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he had answered. "Things happen like that in life, I suppose."

Then three miles further toward town they had journeyed without more intercourse beyond the observation, near the McDermott lumber job, that it was a wonderful day.

It had not been unpleasant to have such a companion for such a journey on such a morning. The boy was duly exercised. At least his heart was exercised. At times he had flicked the mare with needless sharpness and otherwise evinced his capabilities as an expert horseman over ruts and through puddles left from the prior night's rain.

The girl also, despite her primness, had appeared to hold him in increasing favor as the ride continued. He minded his own business, he was civil, he did not try to pry further into her affairs. She had come to the conclusion quickly that he was "a very nice boy."

So down East Main Street the mare stepped lively, shied at the Barre trolley, pulled up short for Jim Hoadley's bakery wagon that bowled out of Cross Street, slowed to a walk and turned the bank corner up to the feed store hitching rack. All the farmers "tied" before the feed store; the mare found the place by instinct.

Driving in between a dump cart and buckboard, the driver alighted, lifted out the girl's telescope bag and held it while Miss Carrie Flynt climbed down unassisted. With an "I'm ever so much obliged" she took the bag and went on about her business. The boy looked wistfully after her a moment, then shrugged his ample shoulders. Unchecking the mare, he dragged a tie-rope resonantly from beneath the seat. He fastened the animal with gaze following Pat Ryan's sprinkling cart where three barefooted boys and a small, dirty-faced girl were walking in its spray as Pat phlegmatically converted that particular stretch of South Maple Street into a muck-hole.

The boy knocked off the over-sized derby hat in the process—or the mare knocked it off, jerking out the reins to snuff the oat-sprinkled ground where English sparrows fluttered. An anxious time ensued getting the result of Pat's ablative industry removed from its crown. But spit and the under side of his right coat sleeve succeeded; the mare was secured for the day, and all portable property in the vehicle hidden from passing Artful Dodgers. Then the boy went back around the bank corner and stood in Main Street.

The big hands on the Court House clock registered the hour as precisely nine-thirty. The youthful arrival sought to verify this on a sizable dollar watch. The watch was so ample, possessed so much material with which to compute

the hours, any discrepancy seemed preposterous. But as the lad immediately scowled and broke a thumb-nail trying to open the case and correlate the two, honors for accuracy went to the clock. Then, there being nothing further to employ him beyond shooting his cuffs, tightening the riot of silk he imagined a neat bit of haberdashery and going about the business which had brought him to Paris, panic possessed him.

He knew exactly where to proceed to consummate his business. In that direction he finally walked. But he went five times past the plate-glass windows of the *Paris Daily Telegraph* before finding the courage to enter. And the fifth and last time was eleven o'clock, even by the Ingersoll. Between nine-thirty and eleven, among other desperate expedients for the consumption of time, he crossed to Farrell's Corner Lunch to fill an inner void with ham and eggs — his early start from Foxboro doubtless precluding a breakfast. Reading the sign —

FARRELL'S QUICK LUNCH

N. Farrell, Prop.

"He Eats at His Own Café"

and deducing that what was wholesome for the "prop." was doubtless beneficial for the patron, even the Foxboro patron, the embryo journalist entered the establishment and selected himself a revolving stool at the counter on the right. He laid his derby hat down carefully on another stool, tucked a red-fringed napkin in his too low vest, pried up a plate from the sticky oilcloth and waited stiffly for viands and service.

He ordered ham and eggs.

He affected not to recognize several male customers at tables along the windows behind — mostly adolescent loungers spending fifty cents' worth of time over ten cents' worth of pie. He lost himself in large contemplation of the placarded suggestions behind the register which received and computed the Farrell profits.

At length the proprietor returned from the kitchen while the succulent combination of hog and hen was writhing on a smoky griddle, wiping perspiring forehead on an apron. It was the same apron, by the way, which cleaned the cutlery before being laid beside each patron's plate.

"In town for the day?" demanded Farrell, arranging bottles of catsup beside the register.

"Yeah," and the out-of-town guest affected *ennui*.

"Where from?"

"Foxboro Center."

"Thought I see one o' Jeff Somers' rigs take the bank corner, a spell back. Shoppin' or lookin'?"

"Neither. I come to — s-s-secure a p-p-position."

Ned turned, smirking. "Where you aimin' to connect?"

"The *Telegraph* office!" Business of fixing necktie, shooting cuffs, nettled dignity generally. "I'm gonna be a journalist."

"A which?" Ned's bad eye narrowed wickedly. He was a rotund little man (he ate at his own café!) with a cherubic mustache, little folds of skin down the outer corners of his eyes, a bald head, mouth filled with gold teeth, and a seething diamond on a very soiled hand. He was somewhat of a sport, Ned Farrell, and occasionally lost money in bucket shops. "Whatter you mean, journalist?" he scoffed.

"I'm gonna work in the front office — write for the paper — editorials and — pieces."

"Oh! You're gonna be a *reporter*?" Then after a moment's squinting at a bottle to get its proper spacing, "Cinched the job?"

"It's good as cinched. That's why I come over the mountain to-day. Mr. Hod wrote for me to come and see him. I'll land it all right, 'the place', when he hears how good I am."

"I suppose you'll tell him?"

"If I don't, nobody will!" Clever retort, this. Not such a fool as he looked.

"What experience you had, to write for the paper? Takes brains, don't it?"

"I been writin' for the paper almost a year — ever since my aunt died. The Foxboro items."

Ned turned and stayed turned. "Your aunt? Foxboro? Are you Zach Haskell's kid, *David*!"

The other nodded, flushing to hear his identity thus pronounced before he had been in the place two hours. He grew abruptly interested in a lithograph above the coffee urn, acclaiming somebody's cheese. The loungers behind were listening, watching, smoking interminable cigarettes and crunching each smoldering butt in their saucers.

"Then you must be the fresh gink who wrote up Jim Thorne's fishing trip — when he fell in Lake Hathaway and had to walk home in his two bare feet?"

"Yeah, I wrote that piece. Our town laughed over it for weeks."

"So'd this town here. But Jim Thorne didn't, not by a jugful. Raw as a boil, Jim was, when he seen that piece. Heard him talkin' about it. Said if the writer hadn't been an ol' woman — he thought your aunt was alive, of course — he'd went over to Foxboro and knocked his dam' block off."

David tried to smile with the freemasonry of men of the world. But Farrell's eyes continued hard. Thereat Dave whetted his lips and frantically sought more literature anent cheeses.

"No, he couldn't have heard about this aunt o' your'n dyin'," went on the one who "ate at his own café." "He didn't push the thing 'cause he thought a lady done it. Am I right or wrong, Chick?" and the man looked for confirmation toward one Jennings who drove a wagon for the American Express. Chick caught Ned's wink.

"You betcha life," he responded grimly. "Jim 'll rip the guy wide open that said something about him public — in a paper."

The ham and eggs here commanded Ned's attention. He hurried into the rear, leaving a boy gone suddenly flaccid. When the proprietor returned and knocked down the thick platters on the counter, the patron did not appear excited concerning the democratic viands.

"So you're the smart Alec who made Jim Thorne the laughin' stock o' Paris?" continued Farrell as he drew Dave's coffee. "Well, you've sure got your nerve with you — comin' right into this village and gettin' a job on the paper permanent!"

"Why?"

"By the Lord Harry, you'll learn! Regular gorilla, Jim Thorne is! Packs a punch that'd spin you senseless clean through the middle o' week after next! Ain't it the truth, you fellers?"

Vigorous chorus, "You bet!" from the windows. Contribution from Jake Wilson: "I seen him beat a lumberjack

to pulp one night. And all the poor coot done was spit on Jim's shoes. Just an accident."

"I only wrote that piece f-f-for f-f-fun."

"You'll never be able to make Jim think so. If you're half as wise as you look, you'll get back to Foxboro while you got health and strength."

David attempted to masticate the rations he had purchased. They tasted like a sole from last year's footwear and chewed like the corner of an ancient rubber mat. After a painful silence he protested:

"Mr. Thorne 'd never know 'twas me that wrote him up if you don't tell."

"Well, a thing so serious as pokin' fun at a feller that came near drownin'—and loosin' a perfectly good pair o' goloshes besides—is somethin' that can't be overlooked. Just see it from Jim's standpoint. Suppose it was yourself?"

"But it won't get you anywhere to tell."

"'Tain't a question of gettin' *me* anywhere. But now that you passed me this secret, how the devil am I to sleep with the awful thing on my conscience?"

"Sleep?"

"Sure! I'm gonna be a tormented man from this day forth. Here's me, runnin' a first-class restaurant in this town, and Jim spendin' his money in here like water. Here's him makin' his brags from Wickford Center to Hastings Crossing he'll tear the eternal tripe out of the cuss who made him read so foolish *in the paper*—if it only was a man. And here's you, the guy that done it, comin' right into the place and settlin' here like a little tin Moses takin' title to the Promised Land. I gotta go 'round in the cloak of a hypocrite, hidin' information for which my best customer 'd barter his swollen bankroll. All because he wants justice. Gad!"

A customer entered here and for a time Farrell attended to his business. David assimilated his fortifying calories as best his distress permitted. But when the customer was served, however, came an incident far more perturbing than a possible mix-up with a bellicose fisherman. Ned was assaying the business activities of Main Street, when he suddenly jolted and cried in astonishment:

"Sufferin' Moses! If there ain't Lill Whalen!"

At the tables along the wall the boys turned with interest.

All but young Jennings. Chick had only "driven express" a matter of three or four months. He was popular with the town's sporting element, though somewhat acclaimed as a newcomer. Thus he demanded, "And who's Lill Whalen?"

"Mean to say you don't know Lill? Take it from me, she's some warm baby."

"Which one is she?"

"Comin' across the street. If she turns in here there'll be a scalpin'. Thank Gawd, I'm bald!"

David looked also, his mouth agog with roll. Listlessly negotiating the Main Street "traffic," consisting at the moment of a farmer's rig, a high-backed automobile and a white-hooded butcher's wagon, was a comely girl of eighteen summers moving toward the restaurant corner.

Something about her was disconcerting—at least to the lad from Foxboro. Over a gaudy shock of tawny-colored hair she wore a saucy tam o'-shanter, most of it hiding an ear. A sleazy, rumpled tailored suit brought out the curves of an oversexed body; her near-silk stockings had a hole in each heel; she needed a shine on her oxfords. And yet she was sordidly pretty.

This girl reached the corner and lingered there aimlessly. So long that Jennings demanded, "What about her? Who is she, anyhow?"

Ned chuckled. "Old Whalen's daughter — Jeek Whalen. Protestant Irishman! Dirty old coot. Cleans out boilers. Got a cast-iron stomach, Jeek has! Up to the Junction fair last year he et half a dozen bananas, skins and all, and washed 'em down with a pint o' kerosene. Just to win a bet he could do it. Never hurt him a mite; you couldn't kill him with an ax."

Rafferty chuckled in confirmation. "Yeah," he added; "after her old woman had produced nine brats, she took to lyin' out under the pear tree in the Whalen yard pickled like a ton o' sauerkraut. Local highbrows got the shivers and took her to the county farm. She ended up pie-eyed on smuggled hooch and jumped one night from a bedroom winder. Busted her neck. Town buried her. I drove the hearse."

"What become of the family?"

"Scattered, mostly. Three of the girls went bad with mill-hands. Lill herself was makin' small change from

come-ons before she'd done up her hair. Don't know so much about the boys. I guess they blew." Rafferty laughed and tapped on the glass. The girl saw his beckoning finger and sauntered as far as the door.

"Hello, Lill!" they greeted in chorus. "Come on in, Lill."
"What's the large idea?"

Rafferty caught a sight of Dave's ashen face. The arrival from Foxboro, soon to be a journalist, almost had ham and eggs in his lap, so grimly intent was he on minding his business.

"Got a friend in here we want you to meet. Swell feller. Gonna be a journalist."

"Quit your kiddin'."

"Aw come on in, Lill. We'll blow you to eats!"

This was an invitation not to be ignored. "Tryin' to kid me?" she demanded, entering. "Lay off, you bums. You ain't got the science."

But Rafferty winked and beckoned her over. Graceful hands thrust in shallow jacket pockets the girl slouched across. For an instant she stood regarding them furtively — like an alley cat expecting missiles. Rafferty clutched her wrist. He pulled her down close.

"Get onto the boob," he pointed. And when she had looked at David, he added, "Kid him, Lill. We'll pay for the fun with some grub."

But the ash cat girl was wary of trouble. It took a moment of clandestine coaxing. Whispers and protestations, assurances of remuneration and exemptions from consequences, sounded behind Dave's back. Finally the girl strolled over.

"Hello, dearie!" she greeted her victim. "How's taters growin' to Podunk?"

David's stomach turned over. He reached for a cruet and wrecked his coffee.

"Listen. I'm talkin'. When a lady addresses you, be polite and listen!"

"Please go off and let me alone. I don't know you."

"Aw — sweetheart!" And the girl slid a shapely arm around his shoulders. He drew away and appraised the distance to the sidewalk. Lill Whalen saw him and affected a badly frightened start.

"Oh — Davie-ee!" she cried in hurt surprise.

The lad nearly fell to the floor. Her acting was so con-

vincing he glanced down her shabby figure to make certain they really were strangers.

"You haven't any right to call me by my first name. You just learned it from these fellers. We never met before in our lives!" There were tears in his eyes.

"Ain't you Davie Haskell?"

"Yes, but ——"

"And *don't* you come from Foxboro?"

"Yes, but ——"

"And you mean to sit here and say *you don't know me?*"

That was exactly what David meant — exactly and precisely. The boy turned blindly to Ned. "Please make her stop botherin' me!" he pleaded.

But Ned was ruthless. "If you know her, why don't you acknowledge it? Stop pullin' that Injured Innocence stuff! Pay your respects like a man."

"But I never saw her before in my life!"

"Go tell it to Sweeney! Lots o' you fellers come down here from Foxboro, raisin' hell with local hearts and tryin' to look like an ad for Mellins Food!"

"Please let me go!" This to the girl. "A lady wouldn't do it!"

Affecting a fine fury the girl backed away. But she kept his pathway blocked to the door.

"So!" she mimicked. "Gonna throw me down, are you? After all we been to each other on the sly, gonna give me the icy stare and say we never met? We'll see about that! S'pose I started out through town and spilled what I know? Who'd folks believe? Of the two of us — a feller or girl?"

"That's right, Haskell," the lunch man averred. "The woman always gets the benefit of the doubt when there's been misbehavin'."

"But I haven't misbehaved! She couldn't speak a word — that'd be the truth!"

"Couldn't I, though?" the girl retorted. "You want me to try?"

Dave stumbled up, but his heckler grabbed him. "Do you?" she snapped.

She wanted to wreak vengeance upon him. His honesty hurt. With a flip of her hand she hooked a forefinger inside his vest. The next instant she had ripped it open to the bottom, spilling out his tie.

The boy stood helpless before her. Had she been male, he would have stretched her on the floor. But she was Woman—the sex he had been schooled to respect, honor, reverence. He felt dizzy and bilious. When his vision cleared, she had his derby hat.

"Please gimme that!" he sobbed.

"Will I, though?" She reached a chair, placed the hat on its seat and sat down. On the derby.

With a plop of his heart, David knew that his headgear was ruined. But the path to the sidewalk was finally open. He stumbled toward the door, face awash with tears, gripping the vest to button it outside.

"Hold on there, you!" roared Farrell. "You don't scut out and not settle your bill!"

"You let her spoil my hat, and it's the only one I've got."

"You settle that with *her*. Cough up half a dollar for them ham and eggs."

David relaxed his clutch on the vest to fumble for the money. Tears of helpless rage were so thick he could scarcely see his folded, five-dollar note. Ned took the wadded pellet of currency and paused; he couldn't make the change.

Lill realized her quarry in flight. It rendered her hoaxing abortive. She sprang to her feet, picking up the hat. Its broken flatness was ludicrous.

"So my little sweetie's frightened?" She started again toward him to crush the battered thing on his head. The boy lurched for the exit. A chair stood in his pathway. An instant later it was not in his pathway; he had sent it flying sideways. A crash and a thud came together. The crash was the glass front of the cigar-stand, smashed to slivers. The thud was the fall of Dave's body, through the screen and out on the sidewalk. He scrambled up and took to his heels.

Thereat Lill Whalen laughed—shrill, metallic, witless. "My Gawd!" she cried. "Who is he, anyhow?"

"He's an elephant-hoofed fathead who's busted a four-dollar case front!" snarled Farrell, coming around to survey the débris.

"Well, you should worry. You got his money."

"Yes, b' gad. And I'll keep his money." Ned was wrong about the damage; the glass was replaced for a mere ninety cents.

The fun, however, was over. The boys by the windows arose and yawned. Lill quashed the bitterness that struggled sharply in her pinched and battered heart. "Come on, bums. Settle!" she ordered.

"Settle for what?"

"You said if I'd kid him, you'd blow me to eats."

"Aw, go chase yourself, Lill." One by one they laughed themselves out.

The girl's face set tightly. This sort of thing was Man — as she had come to know him. She turned to the owner. "Say, Ned, *you* oughta give me a feed on the strength of that monologue. Honest, I'm famished."

"Where do you get that stuff? Feed nothin'!"

"You wanted him kidded, didn't you?"

"Not enough to let you eat me out o' house and home. Especially after all this damage."

"But all of you wanted him scared. You said so!" She could not follow his logic.

"Aw, shut up and get out!"

"Say, Ned, lemme finish up the boob's ham and eggs. I'm famished, Ned."

"And have people see you eatin' to my place and queer my swell trade? Take the air!"

The girl swayed wearily. "You're a hell of a friend," she pronounced.

"Friend? Of your'n? You can't pull my leg, Lill. I ain't no sap from Foxboro. Get out!"

Lill was close to tears. But she laughed. She had learned to laugh. She flipped the flattened derby across the empty restaurant, where it fell from sight behind the piano. Then she straightened and preened herself. Ned had started for the kitchen with his apron full of glass. He dumped the glass and hunted a yardstick to measure the case.

"Ned!"

"Now whatter you want?"

"Don't mind if I take a toothpick, do you?"

If Lill meant it as a joke, somehow it missed. Missed lamely. But it wasn't a joke. Not wholly. It was more a philosophy. And again the girl laughed — mirthlessly, sardonically, aridly.

There was pathos in the way she carefully selected a toothpick and went from the empty restaurant.

CHAPTER II

A SAVANT IN SODOM

The *Daily Telegraph's* kindly old editor shoved back his broad-brimmed Stetson and reached for his pipe. "So you're David Haskell from Foxboro who thinks his calling is journalist? Where's your hat?"

"I — lost it."

"Wind blow it off?"

"Not exactly. It — met with an — accident."

"Funny stunt, huntin' a job bareheaded! What sort of accident?"

"Over in the lunch room. Somebody sat on it — by mistake."

"Make 'em settle?"

"No, sir. I couldn't. It was — a lady!"

"Ho! Ho! Young man, bound to be a journalist, comes to the wicked city to get his start. And first thing happens, lady sits on his hat! What lady?"

"She was a perfect stranger to me."

"Why didn't you buy another? Don't you know that in landing a job, the first thing that counts is appearance?"

"Yes, sir. But I didn't have enough money."

"What's that? Come to Paris without the price of a hat? How you aimin' to live — the first week anyhow — without the price of a hat?"

"I brought enough money, but — I lost it."

"Lady sit on that, too?"

"No, sir. I just lost it."

"Hat and money gone, first pop. Sort o' blue Monday for you — what?"

"It won't be — if you'll give me a place on this paper."

"What do you think you can do?"

"I want to write editorials — everything a journalist usually does."

Sam came erect. "Young man, forget that word 'journalist.' Just plain 'newspaper man's' good enough for a chap

who draws a regular envelope. How old might you be, and as the feller says — from what causes?"

"I'll be twenty to-morrow. It's my birthday."

"Folks livin'?"

It seemed to distress him, that question. "Well, father is. I thought you knew him. Zachariah Haskell's his name. You know the Blodgett place in Foxboro? He farms it."

"Oh, ho! So you're the young coot who writ me that eight-page letter, askin' for a job!"

"Yes, sir. And you wrote back for me to come and see you."

"Well, if you're gonna be as long-winded in your stuff as you was in that letter, you're fired before you start. Let's see, your aunt was correspondent to the Center, warn't she?"

"Before she died — yes, sir!"

"So she died, did she? Well, newspaper work kills 'em off. Gonna kill me off one o' these days if I wade through any more eight-page letters from aspirin' journalists. And who's been writin' items from the Center since?"

"Why, I have, sir — didn't you know?"

"My young partner, Bill, looks after the people who cover the county," and Sam pointed his pipestem at myself, listening to the heartbreaking interview at a typewriter by the window. "So you been correspondin' from Foxboro and now want to branch out professionally and get into trouble? Well, well! What's your ma think about it?"

"I — never had a m-m-mother."

"Who raised you?"

"My aunt; dad's sister."

"And she up and died?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who's keepin' house for your father now?"

"Old Mrs. Blodgett *was*. But she up and died last April —"

"Holy Moses! Don't the females in your family do anything but up and *die*? Whatever put it into your head you wanted to be a reporter?"

"I dunno. I was pretty good in English at the Academy. So good I never had to take the yearly examination, anyhow. My teacher said I oughta go in for literature. I wrote the class play, 'Comin' Through the Wry.' You yourself said

it was so good — in your paper — that we got the chance to put it on down here in Paris for the Odd Fellows.”

“What! Were *you* the fellow who wrote that Odd Fellows’ play? I said it was so *rotten* it was good. They made such a holy mess of it. What other crimes have you committed in the name of ignorance, literature and art?”

“Well, I helped get most of Aunt Sarah’s items. And I worked two summers in the office of the *Foxboro Times*.”

“And on the strength of such a record, you think you’re cut out to set the journalistic world afire and monkey with your destiny generally?”

“Yes, sir,” pitifully hopeful.

“Is there any really good reason why I shouldn’t grab you by your britches and heave you through the nearest window?”

“No, sir.” Then grimly, “But I’d write a dandy piece about it if you did: ‘How It Feels to be Heaved Through a Window by an Actual Editor.’ Maybe it’d give me a flying start if you liked it well enough.” The pun was artless.

My partner stared. Then he grinned. “How much ’ll you work for?” he demanded.

The question was momentous. David finally blurted out:

“Would five dollars a week be too much?”

“Five dollars! *Five dol* ——”

“I’d work for almost anything to get started,” the lad added hastily.

“But *five dollars*! How you gonna live and pay your board on five bally dollars a week?”

“You mean — it isn’t enough?”

“Our last reporter was cheap at eighteen.”

“Eighteen dollars! In money?” The boy’s heart turned over. Then he begged wretchedly: “I *wish* you’d try me, Mr. Hod.” He had been so confident the job was only awaiting his acceptance that the editor’s catechism was Chinese cruelty.

“I’d pretty near made up my mind the paper was done with cheap help,” Sam went on. “Our last reporter nicked our bankroll for a darned sight more than his wages. We were tickled stiff to ship him to Albany to get him from sight.”

“Didn’t he do enough?”

“You bet he did! He did so goldurned much that if he’d

kept on another fortnight we'd ended up hung. Initials skewed in his items, people livin' at the wrong numbers of streets—it was awful! Twice in succession he had old Joel Mason residin' at Fifty-five School Street—which is the home o' Samantha Mason, old maid schoolma'am and positively no relation. He sent folks visitin' impossible places and brought in outsiders to stay with relatives who seemed to reside in saloons, old stables, vacant lots and town reservoirs."

"I'd promise to verify everything carefully ——"

"He brought dead folks to life—by too much dependin' on the town directory; had corpses attendin' clambakes and ministers winnin' pool tournaments. And he held funerals for others so darned much alive they come in here with ball clubs and darned near wrecked the place—all through not takin' the proper care to confirm the sources of his news or lettin' the town jokers guy him."

"I got a pretty good eye for human nature. I generally know when folks are kiddin' me."

"But it's what you do when you *know* it, that counts. There's regular hell-holes of blatant hypocrisy in this town—persons who think it's smart to put somethin' across on their neighbors in print. A chap's got to know 'em. He's got to know the liars and deceivers, the horse thieves and scoundrels, the wife-beaters and one-night married folks, and steer away as if they was a pestilence. He's got to know a town's kineology and most of its prejudices. He's got to watch out for the free-advertising thieves and the cranks who want to grind axes. And men like that come high—as high as eighteen dollars a week."

"But the professionals have got to start in some time. Couldn't I begin on the safe side? Doing things like writin' editorials or short stories, or even start a novel, maybe, that'd run serially ——?"

The editor groaned. "I buy that stuff by the pound and don't have to set it, either. And I get my editorials by the ton, most of 'em in the neck. No, if we could use you at all, it'd be in leg-work through Main Street—findin' out who's sick, dead, married, visitin' in the place, gone on vacations ——"

"Well, I'd have no objections to workin' for eighteen

dollars a week," the boy gulped. His wistfulness was heart-rending.

"Run a typewriter?"

"No, sir. But I could learn. I'm generally pretty expert in what I start to do."

"That's gratifyin'. Experts is scarce!" But Sam looked in the fresh, eager, boyish eyes and felt a stab of compassion. He glanced across and caught my eye. "Come into the composing room, Bill," he suggested.

We left the prospective molder of public opinion seated before the cluttered exchange table, white with suspense. Sam closed the intervening door.

"Well," he demanded, "shall we be a couple of fools again and take on a new liability?"

"He'll get over his crudity when he's been a month on the Street. Somehow I like him. At least he's a relief from the cigarette-smoking egoists who drift up here from Springfield and Boston."

"But his clothes! He looks like an encore from the Old Family Album. That necktie would call out the fire truck, and if we sent him after an obituary, he'd break up the funeral. Even the corpse would laugh at them trousers and boot spurs."

"You and I were no molds of fashion when we hit this town, Sam Hod. The kid can be civilized."

"You want to take the job?"

"Perhaps; if he's got a nose for news and dramatics."

"We can't tell much by his Foxboro pabulum."

"Give him a trial. Send him out on an easy assignment. See how he handles it and decide when he shows us."

We went back to David.

"All right," Sam chuckled. "We'll take you on trial. We'll give you a sample assignment and find out your bump of proportion." Sam looked over his datebook. "In town for all day, I take it?"

"Yes, sir. If I landed the job I fixed it up with Jim Adams to come over on his bicycle and drive back the mare."

"Hum! Listens like sense. All right; consider yourself a reporter. But first see the cashier and get five dollars for a hat — you can't go representin' the *Telegraph* bare-headed. Then we'll give you a story to do and if it shows promise, my partner 'll take you in hand."

"I'm terribly much obliged, sir. I'll write so much news there won't be room for anything else in the paper ——"

"Not on your life, you won't! That's why Bill is gonna look after you — for a good newspaper man ain't known by how much he writes, but how little. It ain't what he says; it's how much he *tells*. You'll need some new clothes and a necktie that don't kill off the clientele subscriber by subscriber. And Bill will find you a place to board and get you a typewriter you can't break with a sledge." Sam turned over the leaves of his notebook, hunting an assignment that couldn't possibly get the paper in trouble. Finally he found it.

"Great!" he cried. "Fish and Game Association held their regular monthly meetin' last night. Go hunt up their president and bring back the story."

"Yes, sir."

"Trim it up with a puff for each of the officers and especially mention Jim's fishin'. Crack angler of the county, Jim is. Fix him up shipshape."

"Jim?"

"Jim Thorne. Fish and Game president. You'll find him up to the knittin' mills. Hustle and you'll catch him before he leaves for his lunch."

CHAPTER III

RABBITS AND PYTHONS

Poor David! He came from the office fingering our cashier's five-dollar note. But he paid no more attention to its value than he did to his heart-beat or how he came by two hands or what a man named Smith was doing at the moment on the corner of Pierce and Fourth Streets, Sioux City, Iowa.

Why in the name of all the Olympian gods and their fifty-seven varieties of relatives and satraps, did that first assignment have to be Jim Thorne? Why pick the one human gorilla in all the universe who was yowling to pull him limb from limb? David got down the office steps and nearly believed in a personal devil.

He had never seen Thorne in his life. He had not even been on hand that day when the near-fatality occurred on Hathaway. He had written the account from hearsay — drawing his local color from a similar mishap to old Wilbur Nieson, who had fallen in the lake at about the same spot in the water-lily season. Wilbur had finally fought his way to shore with slime in his eyes, mud in his mouth, a frog in one pocket and twenty yards of lily root snarled around his legs. And some bright spectator had suggested that Wilbur allow it a couple of weeks to dry and then set it afire to get it from his person with minimum personal effort. All of which David had utilized in his blurb on Thorne.

He, David, had assumed that old Jim had also emerged from his watery dilemma with full equipment of slime, mud, frogs and lily root. And the yarn had shaken the valley with laughter, run to a column and earned him two dollars. Now it had risen up to wreck him, to undermine the whole structure and fabric of his future, to make him eat buzzard, to force him to sprawl in a slough himself.

Darn Jim Thorne! If he had to fall in something wet, why couldn't the man have picked a bathtub?

So across Main Street and Putney Park and thence toward

Ben Williams' clothing store this scribe who was rapidly turning Pharisee clumped his way in search of a hat. But on the point of entering to acquire the first specimen of male headgear which came to hand whether a skullcap or fire chief's helmet, something arrested him. *A woman's voice!*

"Wait a minute, David Haskell! Wait a minute while I tell you something!"

Having heard that voice already that morning, under circumstances as catastrophic as a sentence for murder or request for impromptu speech at a banquet, the boy knew the Jezebel was once more upon him. And it curdled his vitals to slag.

He fled up Main Street and through an alley. He looked back once at the end of Cross Street and thought he saw a female following. He vaulted a fence, tore a rip in his trousers, went through somebody's yard — where a dozen hens scattered wildly — and tumbled down into Pleasant Street. Opposite the wagon shop he paused. What a way to start a job!

He became conscious that old Artemus Howard, the wheelwright, had paused at his work to regard him. Dave had an idea. He approached the wheelwright with as much composure as his dynamic advent into Pleasant Street permitted. "You're Mr. Howard, aren't you?" he asked, having accompanied his father to the shop several weeks before when the parent paid a bill. "Haskell's my name. David Haskell! There isn't such a thing as an extra hat around your place, is there — that I could borrow for the day?"

"This here's a wagon shop!"

"Yes, sir! But all the same I thought perhaps there might be an extra hat around the place that I could borrow just till supper."

"How do you s'pose an extra hat 'd get here?"

"I dunno — unless you wore it when you came to work."

"What sort o' fool do you s'pose I am? Think I come to work in two hats, maybe?"

"No, sir. But you might have gone home from work some noontime forgetting your regular hat — and found it out when you got there — and worn another back after dinner. In that way you could get an extra hat here, couldn't you?"

"I could, but I *wouldn't*. Ain't never been so dam' absent-

minded. But if I ever should be, I'll bear your system in mind. Who be you, anyhow, and why the need for this skypiece?"

"I'm reporter on the *Telegraph*."

"What you been reportin' over in Jake Rawlins' chicken coop? Way you come over the fence, I'd think you'd been stealin' eggs."

"I took a short cut — in a hurry."

"Your pants is tore, did you know it?"

David contorted to confirm this pronouncement. "Does it show?" he asked tragically.

"Think I knowed it from telepathy, maybe?"

David sank down on the doorstone, buried his face in his hands and groaned. Howard surveyed him with interest. "Why'd you take a short cut — through Rawlins' chickens?"

"If you really want to know, I was gettin' away from a girl — named Whalen."

"*Lill* Whalen? What you been doin' to Lill that she should be chasin' you?"

"I haven't done a thing. But she started pickin' on me, over to the lunch room. And I busted a show case gettin' out of her way. When I come out of the *Telegraph* office she was waitin' — to light into me a-fresh." And David related the salient features of the Potipharian experience.

Artemus was a stern old Puritan, albeit philosophical by virtue of a loquacious helpmeet and frequent attacks of virulent rheumatism. He turned and glanced about his shop. "Would most any kind of a hat do for the present?" he inquired.

David affirmed that anything to cover the nudity of the human cranium would be considered in the light of a princely offering.

"Maybe I know what 'd answer. S'posin' you wait." Artemus went down the length of the odorous place to return with something resembling a small, inverted basket. "Try this," he suggested, "and see how it fits."

Ostensibly what he proffered had been intended at one time as covering for the masculine scalp. But it looked like a miniature straw bowl lined with dusty black cambric. It was one of those ventilated sun-hats affected by street sweepers, truckmen and out-of-door workers, raised a couple of inches from the head by a framework of covered wire. Dave

tried it on. After a fashion, with some bending, the oval headband fitted — though the boy presented the aspect of a toad beneath a mushroom.

"Colored feller by the name o' Dorgan left it here," explained Artemus. "Subject to fits. Had one here on the floor last summer. Don't suppose his folks 'll ever come for it — the hat. He died the next week and was buried in a grave. Think you could newspaper-report all right in that?"

"I think so; yes, sir. I'm ever so much obliged."

"Feel a fit comin' on, grab it off. Don't know whether fits is contagious in hats but — keep away from that Whalen. She's all they say of her an' worse."

"I'm not exactly afraid of her. Only — there's no tellin' what she'd do."

"That's right. Woman of her sort could do 'most anything, 'cause a man is stopped from slammin' back."

"Just the way I feel about it, Mr. Howard. Has she ever tackled you?"

Artemus — fat, forty and florid — gave a perceptible jolt. "I should say not, young feller. I'd take her across my knee an' spank her — *good!*"

"Well, of course I couldn't do that. She'd probably have me arrested. Do you mind glancin' out the door now, Mr. Howard, and tellin' me if she's anywheres in sight. I got to go interview a prominent citizen on a popular sport."

Artemus looked and David went.

Ten minutes later, the one-armed man who tended the knitting mills gate — Peter Nolan by name — came out of his doze with a start. "Hey, you!" he bawled. "Wherever you're goin', *back up!*"

"But I've got business with Mr. Thorne. I'm gonna interview him for the *Telegraph*. I'm a reporter."

"The hell you're a reporter! Lemme see your card. I guess I been to Boston and places. Reporters allus have cards."

"I haven't any — cards. But if you think I'm lyin', just call the *Telegraph*. They'll tell you."

"Then you wait right where you are." Peter went to his gate house and cranked a wall phone. "Gimme Miss Bates to the office," he ordered.

"This is Miss Bates," a woman's voice returned at length. Nolan spat reflectively into the dust. "There's a human

nut down here with his head in a basket. Wants to see Thorne for the paper."

"There's a *what*?"

"Somethin' male in a funny hat. Claims he's reportin' pieces for the *Telegraph*."

"Mr. Thorne's in an awful temper this morning; is it really important?"

Peter turned to young David. "Hey, you!" he bawled. "Jim's on a tear and liable to chaw out your vitals. How bad you gotta see him?"

"It's terribly important. If I don't get my story I may lose my job."

The gateman finally slammed the receiver on its hook. "Boss says he's real anxious to meet you. Go right up. Front office. You'll see his name on the door."

"He's — a boss here — Jim Thorne?"

"Holy Moses, he owns the place — lock, stock an' barrel!"

When a condemned man is led from the death-house he is at least fortified with a substantial breakfast, has the benefit of clergy and a brace of guards to sustain him. David had nothing but a pair of shambling knees; his breakfast was like lead in his vitals; pray he could not. The business-like Miss Bates met him in the corridor. "Have you been responsible for all this fool telephoning?" was her angry greeting.

"T-T-Telephonin'?"

"The least I can say: it's ceased to be funny. Half a dozen people have tried to reach Mr. Thorne since ten o'clock to announce that you were in town. I traced one of the calls and found it came from the local express office. Did you come to town by express?"

"I didn't know anything about it."

"Who are you, anyhow, that the American Express should call us up and announce you?"

"I guess somebody's been tryin' to get me in trouble."

"For heaven's sake, what's that on your head?"

"It's my hat!"

"Your *hat*! Are all reporters required to wear those things? — any sign of their calling?"

"Not as I know of — specially."

"Well, I advise you to remove it before you see Mr. Thorne. He might take it for more practical joking."

David didn't desire this interview. Entirely aside from the enmity between them, he didn't desire this interview. And yet it meant the start of his career. Miss Bates opened the door of the gorilla's bloody dungeon. He who was about to die saluted no one. He simply moved forward. In his stage fright he clutched the sun-hat so tightly against his stomach that its ribs went out of shape and never functioned afterward. He stood gaping like a fool, drops of sweat squeezing from his upper lip and forehead. In similar fashion, at sundry times, rabbits have doubtless regarded pythons.

"Well?" roared the huge, bald-headed man over a flat-topped desk. "What do you want and why do you want it?"

"It's a nice day!" cackled the new reporter.

Thorne gave a violent start. He glanced at the window. "Bless my soul, so it is! But if you've come here to talk on the weather, wait till I'm not quite so busy."

"Yes, sir." Then silence. A sickening silence. Unconsciously David's palsied hands were disemboweling the cambric lining from the hat. Words would not come. It was ghastly.

Jim was a ponderous man — his abdomen reached out to his knees and held him from sitting close to his desk. His skull was nearly nude of hair, he had steel-gray eyes, a thick bulbous nose and a mouth like a button. When he stood up, viewed from the rear, he resembled an elephant walking on hind legs.

"Well?" he finally snapped. "What ails you, anyhow? Were you born that way or is it the itch?"

David stopped trembling long enough to chatter: "No, sir."

Jim's eyes went down Dave's figure and stopped at his waist. "What's that thing in your hands — *and why pull it to pieces in here?*"

David looked at the wreck of the hat. He was promptly stricken with chagrin. He held himself from stampeding and made an attempt at speech: "I come to interview you — for the *Telegraph* — Mr. Thorne!"

"Interview me? About what?"

"Fish!" wheezed David faintly.

"What kind of fish?"

"Any kind of fish."

"Whales — sardines — ?" Then Jim saw light. "Oh — you're the reporter!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Well, try and stand still. No — better yet, come here and sit down in a chair. If you must tear that thing apart in my office, it'll keep the wreckage in one place."

David obeyed and sank in the chair. Old Jim swung about and the boy was lost in speechless contemplation of his girth.

"Well," demanded the owner of the big Thorne Mills, "what's all this nonsense about a David something or other coming to Paris from Foxboro? What the devil do I care if a dozen David Something or others come to Paris from Foxboro? Seems the whole darned town has called me up this mornin' to have over some hocus-pocus about a David something or other coming to Paris from Foxboro. Tell me, young feller, is somebody playing me a practical joke or has this David an advance agent I ought to have in my advertising department?"

David breathed again. He stammered, "I shouldn't wonder if some fellers in Farrell's restaurant were tryin' to get me in trouble."

"Farrell's restaurant? Where's that?"

"Why — down Main Street. Don't you eat there?"

"Eat there? Me? I don't eat anything, anytime, anywhere. *I diet!*"

"Oh!"

"I'm due to diet now in about five minutes. But not at any Farrell's. Didn't know such a place existed. Who runs it?"

"Why, Ned Farrell said you were his best-payin' customer."

"If anybody's been tryin' to make advertisin' out o' my size, I'll sue 'em for libel. Why the devil should I be called up and advised about the coming of David Something or other from Foxboro?"

"Ned Farrell said you were gonna knock my block off if you found out I was in town. And the boys that heard him probably thought it was true."

"For Gawd's sake, *sit still!* Why should I want to knock your block off — or anybody's?"

"On account of that piece I wrote, I guess. About you fallin' in Hathaway and losin' your boots. I'm sorry!"

Old Jim blinked. Had his knowledge of human nature been less astute he would have labeled this interviewer an embryonic lunatic and overwhelmed him at once. But realizing that here was only an unsophisticated, suffering boy from the country, a glint of grim amusement gradually softened his shrewd gray eyes; his mouth looked less like a button.

"Did you write a piece about me in the paper?"

"Yes, sir!" faintly. "Didn't you know?"

"Was it a good piece?"

"Everybody said so. It made such a hit it got me a job."

"Then why apologize for it?"

"I heard you didn't like it."

"What was in it I might not like?"

"I don't just remember now. I really got you mixed up with someone else — old Wilbur Nieson who's always soused —"

Old Jim jumped. "What's that?"

"That is — I mean — you two — I thought you fell to the actual bottom of Hathaway — like he did — and come out covered with frogs."

"Me fall to the bottom of Hathaway? Don't you know if I ever fell in a lake — *I'd float?*"

"I can see it now, sir. But it gave me a whale of a scare —"

"Me fallin' in Hathaway?"

"No, you knockin' off my block for writin' that piece."

A wild look appeared in Jim's eye. "But I haven't knocked off your block. I won't knock off your block. I never *will* knock off your block! From the looks of the hat you put on it, I'd say it wasn't *worth* knocking off —"

Suddenly old Jim threw back his head and roared. His shoe-button mouth was gone entirely; he displayed the most winning smile in Paris County and three hundred dollars' worth of gold in his teeth. "So you wrote a good piece about me fallin' into Hathaway and come up here scared out of your wits?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what do you want to know about fish?"

CHAPTER IV

A BROKEN BLOSSOM

No flunkey was required to announce Dave's return. "I had a ride in an ottermobile!" he shouted, falling into the office. "Mr. Thorne brought me back on his way home to diet!"

"Well," Sam reprimanded, "why tell the folks about it over in Pressey's Fish Market?"

"Did you get your story?" I questioned.

"You bet I got my story. I got a wonderful story. I got the greatest story on the meetin' of a Fish and Game Association that'll ever be written in the next hundred years."

"All right," snarled the exasperated editor. "Get at a desk without making it a ruin. And write what you've got in six hundred words. That'll make about two sheets of paper," he added sternly, striving to recall the addled material this reportorial tornado had blasted.

The boy's jaw dropped blankly. "Two sheets of paper?"

"That's all any dry-as-dust meeting of a Fish and Game Association is worth. Besides, the linotypes are tied up till press time with that dam' selectmen's meeting. We ain't got space for more."

The boy turned to me in despair.

"Stop talking and write your article, David," I ordered. "I'll use all I can and run what's worth printing."

This mollified him somewhat and he made a great show of taking off his coat, rolling up his sleeves, sharpening several needle-pointed pencils and fixing himself at a desk.

We left him working while we went to lunch. I returned to find David missing but my partner seated at the exchange table, his feet hoisted on it, fifteen or twenty sheets of paper jogged in his big hairy hands and a look on his face that alarmed me. "What's the matter?" I cried. "You sick?"

"We've got to go to press without any Fish and Game story."

"Ever know a cub who could keep his first effort within specified length?"

"It isn't the length. It's the dynamite! His yarn is so loaded, it may blow up before Allie gets it proof-read."

"Dynamite" in newspaper parlance is dangerous and frequently libelous news material which may land the paper in trouble. I took the sheets Sam proffered. They were filled with round, open, boyish penmanship on both sides the paper. I went to my desk, lighted my pipe and started to read:

Far up in the wooded glades of Vermont's Green Mountains, miles from the city's maddening throng, brushed by the fronds of drooping alders and open all day to the sky and the air, there is a body of water—quiet, placid, serene. Literally it is known as Slugg's Muckhole. But it could not help its name. It had to be called something and Slugg was probably its owner. And mucky.

Far down in the cool, black, boggy depths of Slugg's Muckhole, amid the rush-grass and the frog-moss, never harboring a revengeful thought for anybody in all the world and paying strict attention to the business of existing, there is a pickerel—an innocent, timid, respectable pickerel—that swims in and out, about and around, day after day and year after year.

It seems queer that one lone fish, pursuing the even wiggle of its way on the bottom of Slugg's Muckhole, could possibly be the object of such a vicious attack on its life as was launched at nine o'clock last night when fourteen male humans, weighing anywhere from 95 to 300 lbs. apiece, and worth all the way from one million dollars down to thirty-five cents, met in B. B. Bartlett's insurance office—Justice of the Peace, Real Estate, Rents Collected and Marriages Performed—and deliberately spent three solid hours planning and conspiring for that pickerel's destruction. Fourteen strong and husky men against one lone fish! Is it any wonder a pickerel is mostly scale and bone?

And yet the regular monthly meeting of the Paris Fish and Game Association was held in the aforesaid office last night and to-day that pickerel's chances aren't worth six cents. Ask the members! To-morrow, the next day, on through the years, Slugg's Muckhole will know it no more. For it was moved, seconded and carried unanimously that the fish must perish. Seven of the fourteen members declared it had nibbled at their individual and respective worm and then spat, so to speak, in their faces—by removing sundry portions of said worm, north, east, south, west, and darting away with a fishy laugh in the bulrushes. It had looked through the worm, so to speak, and seen the joker which the worm merely felt.

I looked at Sam in amazement. "You mean to tell me any twenty-year-old amateur wrote stuff that reads like this?"

"I saw him begin it and I saw him finish it. So I suppose he did the middle."

"What's become of him?"

"Dunno. Girl with a saucy tam o'-shanter hat came in the front office to ask about something — maybe a job. That wild Whalen young one, I think. Dave saw her and streaked through the pressroom. Girl shy, probably. He sure did cut!"

"But, Sam, this stuff is new, *different* —"

"Read on," ordered my partner grimly.

Now no person in his senses believes that a Fish and Game Association is ever kept running to re-stock the Slugg's Muck-holes of the universe, pass rules and regulations for poachers or breed new fish by legislative enactment. The real cause for attendance is the chance it provides its members to gather in one room with the doors locked and prove which in the crowd is the biggest liar. They don't come to pay dues and hear the report of the secretary; they come to get the ear of the bunch and see how tall a yarn they can spin and make it stick.

So, having disposed of the pickerel in Slugg's Muckhole last night, the meeting was thrown open to hollar and brag. Of course words were read that hitherto have been stressed in the news as reports of officers and there was some talk of petitioning the legislature to lift the bounty on bear. But the roster really assembled to hear a That-Reminds-Me talkfest. And they pulled all throttles wide open and broke all safety-valves with a monkey-wrench. President James Thorne being in the chair, all he could do was hammer for order. The rest simply opened their faces and let out words.

"Something's wrong here, Sam. I see the hand of Jim Thorne in this."

"Well, Dave wrote the article, without notes, for I saw him doing it. Put his tongue in his cheek, scribbled, chuckled, had a good time generally."

"Then we've got hold of that rare breed of reporter who can interview a man and bring back almost a verbatim record of what he says — from memory. This piece sounds like Jim Thorne talks."

There were seventeen pages of it, probably the first accurate account every brought into our office of what really *had*

happened at one of the gatherings which Sam had designated as "dry-as-dust." Dave went on to narrate a tall fish story on Ben Bartlett and another on Perry Johnson. Jim Allen's was especially worthy of note:

Jim Allen, the game warden, was also present. Any meeting of the local Fish and Game Association without Jim at hand would be like an opening of parliament with no speech from the king. Jim was the only one in the crowd who could really catch anything on a fishing-trip but a cold. But because he can really fish, he said least about it, confining himself to a rehearsal of his troubles as warden and just wherein and why he considers the State Fish and Game Commissioner a fat-head. Some day the Governor may appoint a Fish and Game Commissioner who is not a fat-head and then Jim will have to talk on the weather or the price of cheese or why flat-footed men are usually Democrats.

The two Chase boys sat back in a corner and smoked their pipes, which explained why some clever person back over the years invented transoms. And young Doc Sampson took out his pocket scissors and spent most of the evening clipping something on his upper lip which makes most of his patients pretty young ladies.

Henry Curtis, who holds the Green River record for fights with farmers for leaving bars down into pastures, wanted the Association to go on record as favoring some sort of law making such oversights legal. But Henry got twisted up in his verbs and gave the impression he wanted the legislature to pass a law prohibiting cows from going through such bars when they found them down in the wake of Henry's trespassing. The funny part of it was, nobody seemed to notice the difference and it went to the committee on rules. So the cows of the county will please take notice.

I noticed, as Sam had noticed, that any caustic buffoonery anent Jim Thorne was noticeably lacking. Sam sighed. "I'd like to print it all right," said he, "but of course it's out of the question."

It was my turn to jolt. "Out of the question? It's the richest thing we'll have run in the paper for months. Give that bunch of braggarts a chance to see themselves — and the rest of the town to laugh over their shoulders."

"But Bill, it'd wreck us! They'd be in here with lynching ropes!"

"No they wouldn't. You said you wanted something dif-

ferent in local reporting. Well, you've got it! Any darn fool can cover an assignment and fill up his string with 'The speaker said as follows' down through somebody else's drivel. But only a chap with possibilities could bring back a yarn like this, taking off every loud bazoo with candor. You bet your boots we'll print it — and jack our circulation."

"Jim Thorne's only ingratiated himself with that poor boy to pull personal chestnuts out of the fire. We'll have a list of libel suits a yard long and get potted from alleys beside. And Jim goes free ——"

"Oh, no, he doesn't. Here's where we'll catch him! I'll add a final paragraph. Wait a minute and I'll show you." And I composed the following:

Lest the personal feeling of anyone mentioned in the foregoing article be unnecessarily ruffled and the *Daily Telegraph* held responsible, let it be understood that the material for its contents was supplied entirely by Mr. James Thorne, well-known president of the Fish and Game Association and Thorne Knitting Mills.

Everyone in Paris who has even a passing acquaintance with the affable "Jim," however, knows that as a man and a fisherman he will have his little joke. As a story-teller and an all-around good fellow, we wish to go on record as affirming him one of the best in the valley and we trust no hard feelings will be hurt as a result of the colorful details supplied our new reporter, Mr. Haskell.

"All right," said Sam dubiously. "But the funeral's yours, Bill, if the village rises in its demand for a corpse. Wonder what's become of David?"

We set the article, barring a little editing to make certain personalities less offensive. Then we gave it a front-page position where it took equal prominence with the annual selectmen's meeting and lively fight over street improvements. The paper came out on schedule and was duly borne away to our four thousand readers by the twenty freckled young wild cats who nightly try to wreck our pressroom.

Then came the reaction. We had known there would be a reaction. The telephone started whirring.

The boys in Edwards Brothers' cigar store first wanted to know the author of "that corking take-off," and did we really have a real reporter on the job at last. Calls arrived from

Farrell's lunch room, the Elks Club and the Masons. Fred Phillips came in to congratulate us personally.

The town in general found David's article, decided we had hooked a live one and showered us with warm approval. For nothing pleases a small town more than to see its local Pecksniffs tagged with ripe tomatoes in a pleasing, journalistic manner. By six o'clock David's name was in everyone's mouth and he was well on his way toward peanut fame.

But David! Oh, where was David?

It was a quarter to eight before I learned. I had returned to the office to look over the evening mail when a sudden sharp tapping on the side office window caused me to jump in fright.

"Whatter you want?" I called through the glass.

"Open the window and lemme in!"

"The doors aren't locked. Go 'round the front way."

"No, no! Open the window and lemme in. Quick! Quick!"

It was David and his pleading was so frantic I hammered the refractory sash in alarm. It hadn't been raised for years. I barked my knuckles and dirtied my cuffs. What sort of young lunatic had the paper annexed who prowled the premises in evening dusk and had to be admitted through side office windows? I finally got the sash up and a fifteen-pound foot came over the sill. Dave climbed after it, knocking down files and *Congressional Records*.

"Are you alone?" he asked tragically.

"For heaven's sake, yes! What ails you, anyhow. Can't you use the doors like a civilized human?"

"I didn't wanner be seen."

"I see. Afraid, eh? After what you wrote for the paper?" I stopped. There were tears in his eyes. "See here, young man! You can't leave a job in the middle of the day and go off wherever you choose!"

"I went off because she was lookin' for me. All over! I heard her ask that girl in the front office ——"

"Who's *she*?"

"Miss Whalen."

"What's she want of you?"

"I dunno. That's exactly the trouble."

"But see here, you poor simp; you haven't been slinking

around all the afternoon away from your work, just to keep out of the way of a girl like Lill?"

He slumped across to a chair. Then being alone — we two — he told me all I have recorded in these pages to the present. So much distress showed on his clean, boyish face that I felt compassionate. "But she's really harmless, David, and as common as dirt. What do you think she could do if she caught you?"

"That's it exactly. It's because *I don't know*. I always been afraid of 'em that way — girls. It's somethin' inside that I can't control. Everything just swims in front of me and my knees go soft — when I have to face 'em and talk to 'em. This afternoon when I finished my piece and Miss Whalen *actually came in the office*, my feet just ran. I didn't stop — till I found myself halfway up Maple Street hill. After that I just wandered around — or went back and sat in the buggy. It's awful, a disease of some kind, I guess. I wish I was different."

It was all so real, so vital, so tragic, that I tried not to laugh. "You'll get over that sort of thing in time. It was a great little yarn you wrote for the paper. The town's been praising it all evening."

I tossed him a paper. He spread it open on the table and read it avidly. I wished as I watched him I might know again that thrill of seeing my first story in type. "Thorne gave you some pretty fair stuff," I continued. "You must have made a hit with old Jim."

"He wanted I should go fishin' with him some Saturday. I said I'd show him a place where he'd land some whoppers — " He was interrupted as if on signal by the whirring of the 'phone.

"Another 'fan' to acclaim you as a twopenny genius," I chuckled. "Answer it yourself and hear what he says."

Dave flushed but obeyed.

"Hello? Is this the *Telegraph* office?" the caller demanded.

"Yes, sir!"

"Is that damned little pup of a David Haskell handy?"

"I'm D-D-David Haskell."

"Oh, you are? Well, this is Thorne — James Thorne — *Thorne!* The man who took pity on your suffering ado-

lescence this noontime and tried to befriend you — you little pie-faced viper!"

"I only printed what you gave me."

"Only printed what I gave you? If I was in reaching distance I'd give you somethin' you'd never print because you couldn't — bein' dead. You corn-fed ingrate! You pup! You little barnyard serpent!"

"Has anything especially displeased you?"

Jim seemed to strangle a moment. "Do you think I'm exactly flattering you? Knock your block off, indeed? You bet I'll knock your block off — so far you'll spend the rest of eternity fetching it back. What's more, I'm going to sue your employer for slander. You can tell him I said so and save me the price of a second 'phone call."

"But the article didn't say anything bad about you, except you presided —"

"Do you think I can't read?" The man's voice cracked wildly, for I had lifted the receiver on my extension 'phone. "Adding that to your insults, are you? How about that last paragraph?"

"What last paragraph?"

"Don't you read your own paper?"

The boy's eyes went down the column before him. Suddenly I saw his face go ashen, his jaw drop down, misery descend on his features like the Wrath on Sodom.

"I never wrote that paragraph. Somehow there's been a mistake."

Of course it was up to me to perform. "Cut it out, Jim!" I ordered. "Stop ragging a helpless boy. I wrote that last paragraph on purpose."

"Then I'll sue you *all* for damages! I'll sue you for slander and libel and insult —"

"Sue and be hanged! If you call that explanatory paragraph — putting responsibility where it belongs — insult —"

"You bet I do! And if you think the expense of burying me is so great just because I'm fat —"

"Who said anything about burying you?"

"You did! Right there in the last paragraph of that piece in your bally handbill."

My eye traveled down the column as Big Jim raved. Dave

and I both saw the mistake. "Merciful heavens!" I groaned. My hand went limp; my receiver was lowered.

Some careless make-up man had mixed the linotype slugs. The final lines of the selectmen's meeting had been transposed for the final lines of David's initial endeavor. That concluding paragraph of the Fish and Game story announced to the town as follows:

Everyone in Paris who has even a passing acquaintance with the affable "Jim," however, knows that as a man and a fisherman he will have his little joke. As a story-teller and an all-around good fellow we wish to go on record as affirming him — a first-class sewer, carrying 20-inch pipes, which the selectmen would like to bury in Main Street if they thought the taxpayers would stand the expense.

CHAPTER V

MILK WITS AND MILLENNIUMS

"Well," I sighed, restoring the receiver to its hook, "— accidents will happen. Got to grow a tough hide, son, to stick in the newspaper business."

"But I've lost Mr. Thorne's friendship. Now he's gonna knock my block off in earnest."

"No, he isn't! He'll be all over it by morning — even laughing at it himself."

"Mr. Hod won't fire me for the mistake?"

"Of course he won't fire you. But he 'll kill the proof-reader as sure as apples make cider!"

"Oh, he wouldn't do that? She's a — well, she's not a man!"

"It's up to Allie Parker to check the pages and see such mistakes don't happen."

"I hate to think of her getting into trouble over any piece of mine."

"She's twenty-one and white. We pay her sixteen dollars a week and she takes the money. She has to stand or fall on merit."

"But," he insisted, "*she's a woman!*"

"You mean, just because she's female any sort of error should be excused, never mind what trouble follows?"

He glanced bewilderedly around the office.

"There's no such thing as sex in business, David," I continued. "When a woman takes a firm's money, she has to give service as satisfactory as a man's. And Alice knows it. She's let several 'breaks' slip past her lately. A couple more and it means she's canned."

"Canned!" He was horrified. "Isn't there some way I could square it?"

"Why should you want to square it?"

"I told you. A girl — a woman — is different."

"Your gallantry's commendable, David. But I'm afraid you're due for some painful adjustments."

I locked the front office door against intruders and drew the big green curtain. It started to rain outside and the drops fell musically on the L's tin roof.

"Do you smoke?" I asked him.

"Once in a while."

"All right. Let's smoke our pipes and talk. Send the rig back to Foxboro?"

"Yes, sir."

"But where's your luggage? Where's your extra clothes?"

"I haven't any extra clothes — exceptin' the overalls back home I wore to do the chores."

"You can't wear one suit forever. You'll get to look like a tramp."

He turned away and said ruefully, "That's why I came down to Paris — to earn the money for all I need."

"Are you as financially flat as that?"

"I had five dollars saved. But after I smashed that showcase I knew I couldn't go back and ask for my change."

"Starting about as low on the ladder as you could start, aren't you, son?"

He got the pipe filled and lighted. "Press down that tobacco," I warned him. "You'll set yourself on fire, and the shop besides. What does your father think about this newspaper career of yours?"

"He was glad to have me get out — strike out for something bigger and better — something more in line with my bent. He never liked farmin' himself. But after Ma ran away, he took it up to give himself somethin' to do."

"Ma ran away!"

"He was professor in a college once — Merrimac College — down in Massachusetts. Astronomy!"

"Your dad a professor of astronomy?"

"Yes, sir. He's told me wonderful things about the stars. Pa's sort of nuts on the stars. But it never brought him much money. So he took a farm."

"What was that reference you made to your mother? I thought she was dead."

"Gosh, no! But she's never lived with Pa since I was a kid."

"Divorced?"

"Not exactly — Ma disappeared. She wasn't the kind who liked livin' on a farm. So she — went off ——"

"And you don't know where she went?"

"We never learned." He was fingering the pipe wistfully.

"How old were you at the time?"

"Between two and three years."

"Then who, for heaven's sake, raised you?"

"My aunt — the one who died. Ma's goin' away made dad sort of silent all through his life. He never talks to me — hardly — unless it's to say somethin' useful. He spends his spare time readin'. We had a bigger library in our place out on the Blodgett road than they did in the Foxboro town hall."

"And you read it thoroughly, I suppose?" I began to understand why the boy could write so fluently. "Pilgrim's Progress"? Every homespun hero who ever left a Vermont farm to win extensive laurels as a New York motorman, starts off with "Pilgrim's Progress."

He glanced up quickly to see if I were joking. "No," he responded, concluding it was information I wanted, " — I never cared so terribly much for 'Pilgrim's Progress.' Dad being so interested in astronomy and havin' so many books about it, I naturally took up the stars. It's sort of fundamental, knowin' about the stars. It places the universe where it belongs, gives you a kind of proportion. Then you want to know all about the earth, how it was formed, out of what materials. That gets you into geology. And studyin' the record of the earth takes you into evolution and somethin' of biology. After that, history and literature come easy, because you've got their backgrounds."

I stared at him weakly. "Hell's bells! Am I to sit here and swallow that you've been through astronomy — geology — biology — whatever else you just mentioned?"

"You asked me what I'd read. One thing naturally led to another. I couldn't begin to name the books. And what was beyond me, dad would explain. Awful interestin' to hear him, it was. He made everything so clear. I'll bet he was a great professor. I don't see why they ever let him go."

"Tell me some more about your mother."

"I said I didn't know very much." Again and again he burned his tongue getting the callow little briar alight, laying it down each time it made him perspire. "Dad says she was terribly pretty. She was a teacher of English down in

Merrimac. Dad met her there and they were married. He says at first they were awfully happy —— ”

“At first?”

“Aunt Sarah never liked Ma and I guess she showed it. Aunt Sarah was what you might call — sensible. And pure and religious. She said all marriage was sinful and quoted the Bible to prove it. After a time perhaps Pa believed her. Then when Ma went away, Aunt Sarah said it was a blessin’. Pa wouldn’t be livin’ in sin any longer. I guess she was glad to get Pa for herself.”

“Looks to me like you’d packed your noodle with a lot of high-brow rubbish you won’t have much practical use for!”

“Oh, I don’t know. Knowin’ about the stars is a wonderful thing sometimes. I remember when Aunt Sarah finally died, Pa and I walked back from the cemetery together. I was cryin’, thinkin’ how we’d lost her for good and the horrible way that Death stopped everything. And all of a sudden Pa got to talkin’ of the great Mesozoic period — two hundred millions of years when nothing lived on this earth but reptiles and turtles and lizards and beetles. Sort of jolts a person, doesn’t it, to think that for a time as long as that there wasn’t a man, woman or child anywhere on earth — that the reptiles and turtles and lizards and beetles had the place all to themselves? Just *bugs!*”

I nodded blankly.

“Somehow Aunt Sally’s life didn’t seem to matter so much when Pa got finished. Nor mine. Nor anybody’s. So I don’t call a knowledge of the things that have happened in Nature, rubbish. Not when they help you get your right proportion to the universe and your own part in it.”

“So you’re a philosopher, too? Well, well, *well!*”

Silence came then for a time in that office. The rain pattered, pattered, pattered, on the roof. On the dusty wall behind my head an equally dusty clock ticked on and on — into an eternity as profound as all the æons he dismissed so lightly.

I looked at him and sighed. His eyes were still downcast on the briar in his fingers with the broken nails. But before I could voice a cynicism I really did not mean, our new reporter broke out plaintively:

“I wanner do so much in the world! To make so much o’ my life! It hurts sometimes when I think of it all. As I’ve

read the lives of all those great men who've ever done anything worth while, it's come to me that each and every one of 'em at some time or other wasn't one bit different than I am now. They must have thought the same thoughts and felt the same feelin's. Life reached ahead exactly like it reaches now ahead of me. They made good. They fought their fight. And what they've done, why can't I do also? What's to stop me?"

How could I tell him? I forgot his clothes, forgot his terrific youth. I only thought of the fine, clean soul of the lad inside. Unsoiled, as yet. Unsoiled. But he was going on:

"Why can't I become as great as the greatest man who ever lived? What's to stop me?" He swallowed hard; his eyes lighted up. "It's a wonderful world," he choked, "—when you see it from the proper angle. I've got *one* life to live — that I'm sure of living. And I want to do so much!"

Now and then the hollow clop of a horse's hoofs sounded out on the glistening pavement in front of the office — and the steely rattle of tires forever striking those car-track switches. And the clock ticked on and on and on.

"A thousand influences come into a man's life, David," I said huskily after a time, "to distract him, delay him, sidetrack him, influences he little reckons and cannot count upon. People contact him who sap or rend him. Little, little things throw his switches for life, send him off upon strange rails, carry him toward destinations from which there's no going back. Few men can sternly order the destinies of their lives. The few who do make little progress. They have to remain static, colorless, keep in life's back-waters where the mighty currents of human existence can't twist them." I paused a moment in sad rumination and added, "The world is a mighty flood of those currents and though the swimmer be lusty of heart, iron of will and rugged of purpose, they'll bear him bodily along whence they flow."

"But all great men had ambitions," he argued, the flame of aspiration bright in his eyes.

"Most great men, you'll find, weren't the stern tyrants, the grim arbiters, of their destinies. They were the opportunists, David, who wrenched triumph from defeat, who were washed by cruel waters on strange shores, yet who built

themselves palaces of the soul from the driftwood strewn along life's beaches."

"Only a pessimist talks like that. And a pessimist never gets anywhere."

"I'm not exactly a pessimist, son. But I've lived a trifle longer than yourself. The real success isn't the man who adamantly plans his career and then wades through slaughter to the throne of his ambition. The real success, I'm coming to think, is simply the man who holds true to his aspirations, despite the influences, the currents, the people, the thrown switches, and does the best he knows how with the material to his hand, the situations which develop despite the best he can do to thwart them, the mistakes he is bound to make, the wisdom which lingers when mere knowledge is forgotten. And let me tell you another thing, son. No great man ever really knows that he is great. A man may know when he is notorious, when he is acclaimed by the herd. But to acclaim his spiritual immortality is only given to posterity. Remember that most of the world's prophets, saints and saviors have been just plain mortals with broken hearts, who with spent bodies, weary brains, bleeding hands and worn-out tools did the best they could according to their light and went their way to crucifixion."

"That may be true to a certain extent. Yet all of them had an inspiration, an ideal, a plan — a goal to win!"

"I'm not detracting from your inspiration, sonny. I'm simply reminding you that — like Moses — to most of us it is given only to view the Promised Land from afar; rarely to enter in."

We sat in silence a long time after that. Finally, when he spoke, he seemed communing with himself:

"I don't know exactly what it is I want to do. I wish I did. But I have a feelin' I wanner get out into life, to feel it, touch it, meet it head-on. I've got a hunch there isn't one single situation in human experience I wouldn't like to pass through — touch, enjoy, perhaps suffer from — so I could speak from knowledge of just what it's like. I want to *do* things — you know what I mean. Sometimes I feel, if it wasn't wicked, I'd like to fall into every temptation there is, sin every sin, sort of — just to know the sensation. It's a wonderful world. I wonder if I'll live long enough to learn all that goes to make it up?"

"You will," I sighed sadly. "The day will arrive when you'll look back with aching heart and wish you could have gone through less. You'll succumb to temptations enough in weakness, ignorance, mistaken ideals. Life will deal you plenty — and the deals will come from the quarters you least expect. The ugliest gashes will come from the most harmless looking blades. The worst disappointments will arise from the fairest beginnings and the most terrible, heart-numbing losses will come from the happiest prospects."

"I don't want to make any mistakes," he protested whimsically. "I want to live up to my best. There's times when I wonder if I'll ever look back to the present — right at this moment — and wish I could return, give most anything I've got to return and to live the time over, all of it, from just this present moment. Do you ever have that feeling?"

"I do," I admitted. "Every man and woman has that feeling. And the older they grow the oftener it comes. And you will, too. That time will come on a thousand nights. Life's only a span of trial and error, David. If you watched every impulse and had Solomon's reputed wisdom to guide you, you couldn't keep from making those trials or suffering from those errors. You've got to go through them. live your life, make your mistakes, be made or mangled by consequences. Every man must do the same. And Fame can only say to you, as she said to the struggling poet, 'Don't despair, for I have a rendezvous with you. Meet me at the little nameless grave behind the poorhouse in a hundred years!'"

CHAPTER VI

KISMET'S LADY FRIENDS

Like all heroes of the Alger series who rise from rags to riches before the courage of ignorance has curdled into the cowardice of wisdom, the boy awoke in my home at an ungodly hour next morning on that bromidical premise that being first at the office impresses an employer with industry and application.

He upset a couple of bedroom chairs in the maneuver — or maybe in getting from one of my nightshirts — likewise the umbrella stand in the hallway, which brought my mother awake under the presentment that the house held thieves. Whereupon I lost two hours of languorous repose when she made me get up and stay up to see that David didn't wander aimlessly about our home in the dark, wreck her globe of prize goldfish or smash her precious Dresden china.

I found him fully dressed and eager for the day, further laboring under the obsession that slumber after five A.M. was insufferable self-indulgence. I gave him the keys to the office to be rid of him and finished my repose on the sofa.

He was first at the office without the trace of a doubt, and also like all heroes of the Alger books, had it swept out and tidied before Allie Parker arrived (he gave up the morning sweeping business the second week as beneath his dignity) and thus did his second day in Sodom begin an encounter with a female.

Allie first thought, on beholding the big front door unfastened, that burglars had looted the place in the night. But after her nature, she took an inside look before waking up the town. Thus did she happen upon young David holding a mirror behind himself — a good-sized mirror, the one that hung over the washstand — to ascertain how badly his trousers had suffered the day before amid Rawlins' hens. He was writhing and contorting to get the angle when Allie opened the door.

"For the Lord's sake," she cried, "what's the idea of staying here all night? And what on earth are you doing

with that mirror?" Her voice, cutting the quiet of the somnolent establishment, so startled David that he whipped upright, fumbled the mirror, dropped it with a crash and showered the newly swept floor with silvered glass. "*Now* you've done it!" Allie cried sharply. "Seven days' bad luck! What were you doing with it, anyhow?"

The boy's face, already red, turned violet. "I was — lookin' for somethin'."

"Looking for what?"

"A — rip — in — my — pants!" He backed against a door. "It's worse'n I ever dreamed," he told her thickly. "I tore it some more, bendin' over to sweep that dirt in a dustpan."

Now Allie possessed a father and a younger brother whose nether garments frequently developed apertures. So she had no illusions about male attire. "Turn 'round," she ordered before she removed her hat. And when he still desisted, she laid abrupt hands on his huge elbows and spun him around. "Huh!" she observed; "it isn't so bad when you stand up straight."

David craned his neck, nearly dislocating his vertebrae.

"You can't go 'round the town like *that*! You might bend over."

"I know it."

"What are you going to do?"

"I wish I knew."

They regarded one another as though the rent were a question of state. At length the office girl closed the street door, ran up the curtains, took off her hat and kicked the larger triangles of the broken mirror against the wall. Then she prodded and punched up her golden locks before tying a black cambric apron about her slender waist and donning a pair of paper cuffs. The boy watched this program dry-lipped.

She was older than David by a couple of years — a girl of medium height, inclined to be angular, in a white shirtwaist and plain black skirt. She had hazel eyes and what her reddish-gold hair lacked in quality it made up in mass; she gathered it in a great clumsy knot high on her head and by three o'clock each afternoon it was lopped toward one ear.

Allie had individuality, however, and a certain antagonistic prettiness. Her profile was perfect; her features were strong

without being coarse. She had a small, round forehead with high-arched brows, a slight cast in one of the hazel eyes, long drooping lashes and kissable lips. Her figure was both breastless and hipless and she gave an impression of being not physically strong.

This girl finished pinning on the brown-paper cuffs and pulled out her swivel chair. She was about to sit down when she again assayed David. "Merciful goodness! You can't stay backed against that door all day! Can't you go anywhere and buy yourself another pair of pants?"

"I haven't got the money just now."

"You are in an awful fix, aren't you? Can't you go out somewhere and borrow a pair?"

This offered possibilities. Across the boy's mind flashed the incident of the previous afternoon at the wagon shop. He wondered about Artemus Howard.

No — David decided after a moment not to bother the wheelwright again. Artemus might have acquired a sun-hat by the expedient of a colored man going into a fit and casting his headpiece off on the premises. It was too much to expect that other persons had gone into fits on the Howard property and denuded themselves of more vital garments. But as he stood there, suffering mentally, Allie grasped the dilemma resolutely. "I've got an idea," she announced. And she started yanking out drawers. "I happened to think, I had a needle and thread somewhere in this desk. Yes, here they are! You come over here and I'll sew the tear up!"

"You'll sew up a tear in my —"

"Don't argue. Come over here and get up on a chair."

Flaccidly, David obeyed. He mounted a convenient chair as timid old ladies mount stepladders. And in the next few moments the rent was mended. Alice snipped off her thread, patted the mend in sisterly fashion and restored her implements to her drawer.

"I'm awfully much obliged," Dave said.

"Well, don't go getting violent; that thread may not stand too much. Besides, it's a shamefully cheap suit. I could almost tear it apart with my hands."

"It cost me twelve dollars. And I earned every cent of the money myself."

"Then somebody stuck you. You ought to go buy yourself a real decent suit, so you don't look so much like a

scarecrow. And that necktie — I'd swear from a distance you'd tried to cut your throat."

"I thought it was a classy necktie."

"Haven't you got anybody to look after you at all?"

"I don't need anybody to look after me; I can look after myself."

"You couldn't sew your own pants."

"That's because I tore 'em in a place I couldn't reach."

"Well, you better get busy and clear up that glass. Newsboys come in here barefoot and if somebody fell and landed on it, we'd have a damage suit."

That word "damage suit" awakened the presentiment that had been in the back of David's mind all night. The boy felt favorably disposed toward this girl — without his customary embarrassment. "I might as well tell you somethin'," he confided. "An awful mistake got by in the paper last night — in the piece I wrote about fish. I was told you might lose your job."

Allie jerked upright. "What mistake?" she demanded with fire. She stalked to the counter, whipped open a prior night's *Telegraph* and slapped it down in front of him. "Show me," she ordered.

David looked. He read the final paragraph of the Thorne article. He frowned. He read the story of the selectmen's meeting also to its end. His frown deepened.

"When did you fix it?"

"Only a couple of hundred papers had been run when I saw it. I had the press stopped while the lines were transposed."

For a moment the boy was staggered. Then a relieving "Whew!" escaped him. "I'm glad," he declared.

"It *would* have been disturbing — seeing your first piece so sweetly bungled."

"I wasn't thinkin' of myself. I was thinkin' of you."

With a sudden disdainful toss of her tawny head Allie demanded, "Why *me*?"

"I dunno. You're a woman. I'd hate to see you get in trouble, lose your job or anything, through somethin' I did."

She looked at him curiously. Was he joking, making love or merely paying a back-handed compliment? "Why does my being a woman make such a difference?"

"It does, doesn't it?"

"It ought to. But it wouldn't — in such a town and office as this."

"It would if I ran it," he affirmed stoutly.

"Well, you're a long way from running it — yet." All the same, she was vaguely pleased.

"Oh, maybe not so long as you think." His face was very red. He was sweeping up the glass as he talked.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I've got ambitions."

"To run this office?"

"Well, to run one — *own one* — like it, anyhow. You don't think I'm gonna stick here all my life, do you? I'm goin' *up*!"

"Oh, you're going up?" And involuntarily Allie glanced at the ceiling as though appraising its capacity to hold him within reaching distance if he suddenly began ascending like a toy balloon.

"You bet I'm goin' up. I'm gonna be the greatest newspaper publisher in all America before I'm through."

"You think pretty well of yourself, don't you?"

"If I don't, nobody else will."

"Where are you going to get the money to go *up* on?"

"Make it, o' course. Earn it with my own two hands and head."

Perhaps it was his utter sincerity in all this that turned the edge of Allie's cynicism. Anyhow, she pondered. No fellow who had ever worked in the *Telegraph* office hitherto had talked like this — at least within her fourteen months' experience. Most of them declared themselves as soured of life and were caustic and contemptuous of the paper, the town, the world. She began making aimless marks on her blotter. "Well, ambitions aren't so bad," she finally conceded.

"I got it all figured out just how I'm gonna do it," he went on earnestly, seemingly glad to have a person of his own age with whom to discuss matters. "I'm gonna work here and save my eighteen dollars a week —"

"Better wait till you're drawing eighteen a week before you go talking about how you'll save it."

"Why, I'm drawin' that now!"

Allie's hand dropped the pen, ready for the morning's proofs. "You're *what*?"

"Sure. At least, that's what I understood from Mr. Hod."

She stared at the latest acquisition with pop-eyed interest. "That's more'n my father brought up a family on—until a few years back," she gasped.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'll save my eighteen a week till I've got enough to buy out a little paper of my own. I'll run that and make money till I've got enough to buy a larger. I'll run that and make money till I can get a third. I'll keep on doing that until I get a string, each one always larger than the other. Then I'll run 'em from a central office. Men run strings of city newspapers way across America. Why can't it be done with country newspapers too? Not so much money involved or such big profits, probably. But all the same, it's practical."

Allie was strangely thoughtful. This confidence intrigued her. She found herself asking mentally why it wasn't practical. When David departed into the rear room with the débris of the shattered mirror, instinctively she compared him with other young bucks of the town who constantly sought her favor. They, too, bragged of their ability. But it was usually their prowess at shooting pool, manipulating an automobile steering-wheel, bashing the head of some other young buck whose general good qualities they beheld as through a glass, darkly. David's braggadocio was commendably constructive. When he returned, stood the broom behind the door, and placed the chairs again in their proper positions, she inspected him closer. She decided she liked his curly black hair, the breadth of his shoulders, the strength in his wrists. She wondered how he would look clothed in a decent suit, with the proper kind of a necktie, a reasonable hair-cut. If only she could pick out the proper suit for him, dress him, tie that cravat—

"I'd like to see you do it," she remarked at length.

He looked around puzzled. "Do what?"

"Get that string of newspapers."

"Oh!" Somehow his heart turned over. A tiny bit of camaraderie—a frail, elusive bit of camaraderie, yet camaraderie nevertheless—seemed born between them that hour in the office before the rest of the staff drifted in to work. Thenceforth they intuitively accepted that they shared a secret in common. All because of six misplaced slugs of linotype and an alarming rent in a pair of boyish trousers.

Nature is wonderful, truly!

CHAPTER VII

PENDENNIS STRUTS

By Saturday, my partner and myself required no highly entertained town to confirm that we had annexed a financial asset of no mean value. For Wednesday, Thursday and Friday produced literary compositions which tickled the community funnybone no less delightfully than on Monday or Tuesday.

Wednesday morning Mary Worthington's window-mop poodle went mad in Main Street from heat, overfeeding and an all-around satiation of feminine adoration. Under ordinary circumstances, one man-sized kick would have transported the exasperating little cur into poodle heaven. But after it had bitten the small Briggs boy and then attacked Judge Farmer's ankles near the bank corner, the poodle's society became *persona non grata*.

Men who had carried around the idea all their lives that booting a poodle was as easy as breathing, or being born white, or listening to explosive noises the night before July 4th, made the perturbing discovery that as dog-booters they were sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. Main Street turned out *en masse* to obliterate that poodle, having entertained a grudge against it for years as a community proposition. Pillars of Church and State dropped their work to squash it. Staid fathers of the republic declared they would annihilate the frothing little pest if they had to draw fire from heaven and "bust a gallus" in the process. The best dog-booters in the valley volunteered their services. But they booted empty air. Charley Fisk, the barber, took such an enormous pedal swipe when the frenzied canine darted between his legs that he spun around three times, upset a baby carriage and nearly went through a plate-glass window. The dog was finally bagged in the rear of the Woolworth store with most of the clerks squealing on the counters. David wrote up the incident and we let it run two columns. And his thimbleberry laurels grew apace.

To have this sort of thing erupt on a little evening daily

which had carried stereotyped pabulum for years, was epochal. At last the town had a real motive beyond civic pride for buying and supporting its local paper. We were quick to feel the financial stimulus.

Thursday we sent him to cover the minstrel show in the Opera House—an annual event giving the respectable element the chance to make idiots of themselves in public without suffering in person, prestige, purse or position. His report of the affair was so unique that orders from individual Masons totalled five hundred copies to send out of town.

Friday we came near having a village fire. Old Deak Winslow, janitor in the Opera House, cleaning up after the prior night's jamboree, detected the odor of smoke on the premises. High and low he hunted through the theater, the odor steadily growing stronger. Down in the empty dressing rooms it became so acrid he waited no longer for sight of the flames. He burst into Main Street, bawling frenziedly for assistance. Sam Hod, Uncle Joe Fodder and a man named Simpson persuaded him to go back and investigate further before calling out the firemen. Returning into the playhouse, as Deak was preceding the others, he suddenly gave a fearful howl, grabbed wildly at the seat of his trousers and started leaping insanely in circles. Deak was on fire—himself! He had thrust his pipe into his own coat pocket without knocking out the embers and was slowly smoldering into a holocaust. Dave wrote up the incident and it carried the head:

BUSINESS SECTION SAVED

FROM DISASTROUS CONFLAGRATION

IN DEAK SMITH'S CLOTHES

The entire valley was quickly talking about the new humorist on the *Telegraph*. Secretaries of lodges and chairmen of entertainment committees came into the office or called us on the 'phone, begging we send the boy to cover their functions as a matter of effective advertising. We found ourselves running off from five to eight hundred extra copies of the paper nightly, which at a retail price of two cents per copy meant an additional weekly revenue

of between fifty and sixty dollars — a neat sum, practically profit, which no country daily could ignore.

Then editors about the State began clipping Dave's stories. His feature story on Saturday, writing up the birth of Will Pease's new baby son, as though the child were a newly acquired automobile, was lifted in its entirety by the *Boston Globe*. Yet the strange part was, no one was more complacent at the success of this journalistic slapstick than the lad himself.

We succeeded in dressing him more soberly that week. I accompanied him to Ben Williams' clothing store and supervised the acquisition of an entirely new outfit — though Allie was the first person whose approval he sought when he had discarded his mail-order habiliments forever. He hardly looked the same lad when I brought him back to the office with his hair cut properly, his neat black suit fitting him as well as any suit might ever fit him, his heavy feet in oxfords, something about his neck that wouldn't send the village horses climbing poles. Alice poked and prodded him, retied his necktie, picked off ravelings; and he seemed to enjoy it. But in general behavior, for almost a year he was the same goggle-eyed farm boy who had driven in from Foxboro with a novice nurse and smashed a showcase to escape the hecklings of a village mopsy.

His father, Zach Haskell, came into town toward the end of the fortnight, to see how his son was prospering, and we made his acquaintance. He was an enormous man, six-feet-six if he was an inch, with the queerest head and biggest feet of any man from Lake Champlain to the Connecticut River. An elongated head, it was — like a football, more in the rear than in the front. Across his vest-front hung a massive gold watch chain with links like washers. But he was a quiet, inoffensive old man who looked on the world from harmless blue eyes behind twisted gold spectacles, his academic culture long since roughened by bucolic environment. He came in, said, "Howdy do, Davie? How are you comin' on?" and upon being assured that David was coming on excellently, stood around like a great piece of furniture for the entire afternoon, glancing up startled when anyone approached, as though they were going to hit him. Finally he put his big soft hat on his queer-shaped skull, pulling it down with both hands like a huge, inverted pot, said,

"Well, Davie, I guess I'll be trotting," and trotted — a big, silent, half-cracked old pedagogue, who had somehow out-lived his world and been betrayed by his wife.

I gave thought to his wife when he had departed. I wondered what sort of woman she could have been to have loved, wedded and deserted him. Deserted also a baby son.

"What did she look like, Davie?" I questioned when I later had the lad alone.

"I dunno," he answered lamely. "Never saw even a picture of her in all my life. Aunt Sally tore 'em all up, claimin' mother was a — wicked woman."

Yet outside his proclivity for journalistic slapstick the lad was not half so much a genius as the possessor of what may be termed a "photographic mind." And he was a born dramatist. No girl could have a party, no family could enjoy a domestic fracas, no local benedict could fall upstairs — though he broke a wrist — without David seeing drama in it somehow. If he saw no drama he saw no item. We tried him out "on the street" for a time, collecting Personals; these did not attract him as worthy of record unless they could be dramatized. By the end of the second week, eighty per cent. of our readers were tearing frantically through the *Telegraph* immediately on receipt each night, hunting for his daily frolic.

We willingly paid him his eighteen weekly dollars and he seemed ashamed to take the money, the sum looked so large and seemed earned so easily. I secured him a boarding-place with a woman named Brooks over at the end of Seaver Court. Everything looked propitious for an interesting career among us. I fell to wagering with myself just how long we might be able to hold him. Yet in this wagering, I made an oversight.

I failed to appreciate Allie Parker's interest in him correctly — or the fellow's interest in Allie Parker. She was the only girl he could talk to with ease. So he talked a lot. It had come about so naturally that he scarcely gave it serious thought.

One incident occurred toward the close of that first summer, however, which should likewise go into the record as having vital effect on our protégé — the temporary disposal of the Whalen girl and our new reporter's part in her elimination.

On a Saturday night about half-past eleven, David was headed homeward toward Seaver Court. Turning down Beech Street, he beheld a dismal figure — a male figure — groping its way along by the ball lot billboards directly ahead.

There is an arc lamp near the end of the Beech Street billboards. The figure reached this lighted space and paused, holding himself unsteadily against the ragged posters with stiffened arms. It was Wilbur Nieson, the same who had fallen in Hathaway and come out with his legs snarled up in lilyroot. As usual, Wilbur was drunk, exceedingly drunk.

David paused. Instinctively he paused — half in fright, half in dramatic curiosity, to see whether Wilbur would continue or fall. But Wilbur did not fall. Wilbur sagged badly but he did not fall. He was determined not to fall. He knew his condition perfectly — it was Saturday night — but Wilbur also sensed that falling was undignified. Besides, it might cause him to spend Sunday as the involuntary guest of the local authorities. Wilbur kept upright.

Suddenly David beheld another figure come diagonally into the radiance of the arc lamp from across the street. Mayhap it had been watching Wilbur's uncertain progress with malice aforethought. At any rate, this figure crossed Beech street and stole to old Wilbur's side. It was a girlish figure — not without grace — on its head a saucy tam hat.

At once the terror gripped David. Yet curiosity held him so long as he felt himself screened by darkness. What did the Whalen girl want with old Wilbur? He saw. He saw Lill glance furtively around the neighborhood. Then deliberately, subtly, she started skillful fingers through the drunkard's pockets.

Pocket by pocket she looted him. She talked to him soothingly the while and he babbled his complexes trustfully. Each time she slipped her loot in her blouse.

What should Dave do? Could he stand supinely and see the little vagabond rob the derelict so? His better impulses mastered the terror. With a rapid scuffing of sole leather, he found himself stumbling forward.

"Don't!" he begged hoarsely. "Please don't! Not when he can't protect himself."

The girl whirled — startled. Then she beheld the identity of the one who surprised her. "You!" she cried in exasperation.

"Please don't! Give him back his property! His family's havin' hard enough time as it is! And besides — a lady wouldn't do it."

"Who asked you to butt in, anyhow? You keep out of this before you get hurt!"

"It's wicked to rob people. Anybody'd tell you so."

She giggled — nervously — and raised her chin. "Who said I was a lady?" Again the giggle — or maybe a sob. Then angrily, "You heard what I said. You mind your own business!"

He seized and restrained her. "You can't go off with all that stuff of Wilbur's in your blouse. You just mustn't. You've got to give it up!"

"Make me!" she challenged.

"I don't want to make you. I'm just asking you — because if you don't give it up, you'll be a thief."

"Let go of me, you fool!" She had spied two male figures turning into Beech Street.

"I only want to keep you from gettin' in deeper trouble!"

"What for?"

"Because you're a girl!"

Despite her fury, Lill blinked her eyes. "Because — I'm — a — girl?"

"I don't know anything worse than a girl havin' to do things like this."

"Oh — you don't?" Yet as she sought to comprehend, the two men came up.

"What's the big idea?" Tom Torrence cried, puzzled.

"He's — assaultin' me!" accused the village Cyprian. "He set on me here in the dark!"

"I did no such thing!" gasped the boy, aghast. Involuntarily he added, "You were going through Wilbur Nieson's pockets and I only wanted to stop you!"

"I wasn't! He's lyin' — to save himself." This from Lillian to the men. She could not flee. Jeth Hoadley had hold of her elbow.

"Something queer here," Torrence averred. He turned to David. The boy cried wildly:

"Look in her blouse! You'll find Wilbur's property."

The men were merciless. They did as directed. Two or three people out on East Main Street beheld the disturbance, joined the group beneath the arc lamp and heard the sordid

details. The girl began sobbing forlornly. Old Wilbur had managed to fall at last and was dozing to slumber beneath a huge poster which blandly announced, "Drink Horton's Milk and be good to Your Stomach!" David was likewise nearly in tears. Such was the tableau when Chief Hogan appeared.

Monday, about mid-forenoon, the lad was busy on an account of a runaway bakery cart that had strewn pies and tarts through most of North Maple Street, chuckling and squirming, having — as Sam Hod put it — "St. Vitus' dance over six reams of paper," when Sheriff Crumpett entered our office. Crumpett coughed in his customary apologetic manner when his errand meant official business and announced that David was "wanted."

"Now what's he done?" I thought in alarm. Crumpett made his way into the side room where the thumb-nail humorist was contorting in the toils of amusing composition.

"You know who I am, maybe?" he queried. "Judge Wright wants to see you, over to his office."

"Wants to see *me*?"

"He's holdin' court. You gotta appear against that Whalen. You caught her robbin' Nieson, didn't you? Well, Wright's gonna send her up. She's been a nuisance long enough."

"You mean — to jail?"

"Reformatory. Vergennes. Come along, bub. Judge is waitin'."

"I've got — to appear against — aid in sendin' — a girl — to *prison*?"

"I'll go along with you, Dave," I offered.

We found a tragic little group in Judge Wright's office, mostly the prisoner's relatives. The Whalen unfortunate had been weeping afresh. Her clothes were awry; she used her right sleeve in place of a handkerchief. David had almost needed physical assistance to get him up the stairs.

The hearing commanded little formality. The Whalens had retained Jonas Wessel, our local ambulance chaser and bill collector, to represent them. But Wessel was permitted little "defense." Judge Wright merely asked questions.

"Simply tell me what happened Saturday night. The truth, nothing more," he instructed.

"I can't, I can't." It was torture for David. "Not if it sends her to jail."

"Why not? Is she anything to you?" The judge frowned sharply.

"She's a — she's a — I want to help her, not to hurt her! I only saw her sneak across the street and go through Wilbur's pockets. I knew all about him — the hard time his family was havin'. I didn't want her to do it. Then the rest came up and she claimed I attacked her."

Bit by bit, the judge got his information.

"Oh, what have I done? *What* have I done?" David wailed, when I got him out in the hallway.

"You haven't done anything beyond putting that light-fingered little lady where she'll be better cared for than here in Paris." The Whalen girl had been "given" sixteen months.

"I've sent her to jail. I've ruined her life!"

"Fiddlesticks!"

The girl passed out in the sheriff's custody as we stood there. She managed to pause and face David. "You wait!" she said dourly. "You'll be sorry for this. See if you're not!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" moaned the rising young humorist. "I'd done anything on earth for you — than have this happen!"

"*Yes* you would!"

"Come on, young lady, before I clamp on the twisters and hurt you!" warned Crumpett.

Lill was taken away — a tawdry, pretty, poignant unfortunate. And her threat rang in the distraught boy's ears for a month and a day. Down in the street he was stricken with nausea. Journalistically speaking, those pies in Maple Street were never gathered up. That evening the *Telegraph* went to press without its daily feature story. For the sensitive, high-strung, chivalrous youth had consigned a woman to perdition. He was certain of it.

He poured it all out to Allie later that day. And Allie was divided between satisfaction over Lillian's sentence and compassion for David's gullibility.

"You make a darned sight more fuss over the female sex than the sex itself cares about," she advised him, though Allie scarcely reckoned that she spoke with the tongue of prophecy.

CHAPTER VIII

MEET THE FAMILY

The Parkers were an average Paris family.

On the north side of Adams Street, halfway up the hill, still stands a two-story house of chalky white, reached by steep cement steps up a terraced banking. The person who originally built the house apparently suffered from a grievous jig-saw weakness. For there are scallops and fancy angles hanging from the cornices, gargoyles on the gables, lattices and facings of the two verandas in such a wooden confusion of mid-Victorian arabesque that perhaps the Parker family complexes were not due to heredity half so much as environment.

This gingerbread structure back in 1907 was the bizarre residence of one Henry Parker — Allie's father — colloquially known as "Little Hank." "The Jig-Saw House," the townfolk called it. In it Little Hank spent his meal-times, his nights, his Sabbaths, his holidays — and raised his family. As "to every bird its nest seems fair," so Henry saw nothing remarkable about his dwelling beyond a quaint individuality which he accepted as evidence of strength of character.

Personally he was a sallow, undersized little man with narrow shoulders, a prominent Adam's apple, iron-gray hair and a perpetually worried expression that some time next week he had to meet a note. In his store on Cross Street he wore a black cambric skullcap, most of the time at a slightly rakish angle above one baleful eye.

The sign above this establishment suggested something about departments. But as departments were constitutionally inconceivable to little Hank's brain, Paris called the establishment The Jumble Shop. Hank saw no advertising asset in this designation and resentfully accepted that people were perpetually jesting about his business.

Nevertheless, Henry rendered a distinct service to our community. When the prospective purchaser of an elusive

commodity sought it in every other Paris store in vain, as a last resort he tried The Jumble Shop. There the chances were ten to one Henry could dig it out from beneath a cluttered counter, dust it off with a prodigious puff of breath from sunken cheeks and charge all the tariff would bear on the wholesome economic principle that demand ever fixes the price of supply. Henry was reputed to sell everything from locomotives to safety pins, screen doors to vinegar cruets, bucksaws to hair nets and cottage organs to babies' teething rings. He bought job lots of anything offered at an attractive price, sold such of it as he was able and stored the balance against death, bankruptcy, earthquake or fire. But he rarely advertised in our evening daily, he employed no clerks to assist him with his trade — which accounted for his eldest daughter's presence in our office — and only utilized hose for purposes of sale, rarely to fill with water and squirt on his big front window.

Mrs. Henry Parker, his consort and his comfort, was a chinless elderly woman with enormous hips, who spent her days in a pair of soft slippers, a moist red wrapper, a continual worry as to how her husband would ever meet his bills, and a hideously papered kitchen, wherein something savory was forever bubbling on the stove. Few people conceived of her as having once been young and the only occasions when she was reckoned among those present were revival meetings, circus parades, dollar bargain days and neighborhood funerals. She was "Kate" to her husband, "Maw" to her offspring, "Hey!" to the tradesmen and "Damn!" to speeding motorists — in short, the great American mother.

Besides the oldest daughter Alice, the offspring of this worthy couple consisted of Ruth, aged fifteen, with a disposition gradually souring on life as she matured and suffered Allie's priority in maternal favor, and Willie, aged twelve, the great American small brother.

Allie had long since ceased to give her father much concern, for like her mother, Allie was "female" and Little Hank didn't go far from the beaten track to understand females. Hank, in fact, like most work horses of the *genus homo*, regarded daughters as somewhat of a liability. You cast the dice of paternity with Kismet. If you drew a son, you rejoiced; if you drew a girl you took her stoically and

tried to look pleased. But you had drawn a blank and you knew it and you breathed in relief when she married — and ten to one had to raise her offspring.

To her mother, however, Allie was all in all; not only her first-born child but a helper, confidant and sister conspirator against the household males. The two rarely quarreled because Allie, being woman-grown, had her own way on principle. Allie helped with Ruth and Willie. She did half the housework after coming home from the newspaper office in the evening. Mrs. Parker hoped to see her happily married, but dreaded the day of her final departure; she was the only one who would shell peas for her amicably or wash the dishes without a caterwaul.

Ruth was The Household Problem. She was taking piano lessons from little Miss Pease, lengthening into the awkward age, acquiring Views on life and persuading herself she was misunderstood. She read forbidden novels after the household was asleep and borrowed her elder sister's finery without permission. She lived in a perpetual stew because she failed to impress her parents she was attaining to maturity as much as Allie and could care for herself — which she couldn't. She thought she was flowering much prettier than Allie, knew that a band of black velvet ribbon gave an elusive alabaster beauty to her brow and was made for love as the sparks fly upward. She had yet to be domesticated, however. She loved her parents — on appropriate occasions, principally when she wanted money out of them — but was learning to consider them mortifyingly common and likely to bring her down ultimately in sorrow to the grave.

Of Willie, the less said the better. Willie cherished few illusions about life, the family, the neighbors, older sisters. Especially older sisters. He had suffered them in urges and endured them in tempers; he had pinched them in poses and hooted them in dishabille. He had freckles, a paper route, seven Belgian hares and adenoids. His chief bids for domestic felicity were hiding his breath from his parents when he had been smoking cornsilk cigarettes down along the river in the cornsilk season, and leaving his bicycle draped across the side veranda steps where persons sprawled disastrously across it in the dark. At twelve he was nearly as tall as his father, wore out his knickers first in the seat, never had a handkerchief when a handkerchief was needed most, could

rarely find cap or clothes without maternal assistance and a lecture. Any male who could possibly entertain the softer sentiments toward either sister was a boob or a mutt to Willie and when he attained to man's estate he expected to embrace the vocation of electrical engineer. Just why he essayed to embrace the vocation of electrical engineer, he — no more than his family — had never stopped to realize. But it had a loud and sizzling sound and meant monkeying with a force that might some day finish him.

Such was the home toward which, in the second month of his employment in the place and by machinations known only to our reddish-haired proofreader, young David Haskell tendered the social amenities in the form of Sunday afternoon visitation for purposes of acquaintance and mutual introduction.

At the Sabbath morning breakfast table Allie announced to her mother, "Mr. Haskell's coming to-night." Whereupon, being supplied with details, Mrs. Parker broke out in a fine perspiration, fled to the kitchen and announced, "Mr. Haskell's comin' to-night." Little Hank, going up the front stairs, met Ruth coming down and announced, "Mr. Haskell's comin' to-night." Ruth's vitals somersaulted, she turned and fell up the flight, broke into Willie's room and gasped, "Mr. Haskell's comin' to-night." Whereupon Willie, having no one to whom to pass the news, looked blank, then disgusted, and finally demanded acridly, "Well, what if he is?"

"But he's famous!" contended Ruth awesomely. "Everybody says so. He's a — humorist!"

"What's a humorist?"

"A man who's written books and run a steamboat on the Mississippi River." Ruth had somewhere heard the term so detailed respecting one representative humorist, Samuel Leghorn Clemens, since deceased.

Willie was not especially interested in the possibility that David had written books. But that he had run a steamboat on the Mississippi was illuminating. There had been a period in Willie's life — not so far in the past — when he also had aspired to man's estate in terms of such a vocation. So thereafter he no longer affected *ennui* but continued as nervously upset as all the rest of that turbulent household.

All through the day, the Parker domicile was different

than on other Sundays. Allie was chiefly concerned with what she should wear and how the house would look — and spent the pious hours ironing the ruffles of a muslin frock. She washed her hair and couldn't do a thing with it, then started renovation of the premises. The idea seemed to be that David would at once search behind bookcases for clutter and beneath sideboards for dust, appraise her eligibility as a prospective helpmeet from the ragged fringe on the parlor "set" and give the family the Turn-down Magnificent from the angles of pictures on the living-room walls.

Mrs. Parker was chiefly concerned that David was coming to tea and her part of the program was to furnish gastronomical sustenance in quantities and qualities that would bring David down to the dust in stupefaction at the variety of the Parker larder. So after Sunday morning breakfast she applied herself to her pantry or made fiery intrigue with her cook stove. She stirred and she mixed and she greased and she baked. She scooped flour and she broke eggs. The stove top became a curious assortment of kettles and pots and its oven disgorged pan after pan of edibles beyond male description. She made three dozen doughnuts and she roasted a chicken. She "tossed together" dumplings and prepared seven vegetables. A chocolate layer cake was subsequently set on the rear veranda to cool and an hour later four pies followed suit. One o'clock came and she had yet to make the ice cream.

Ruth spent most of the day in her room, coming down periodically to beg her mother or sister if she could wear this or that — all of which had been forbidden her at some time or other — which was not her property, or which mother or sister intended wearing themselves. Upon being emphatically informed that she could not wear this or that, she pouted and kicked her heels and demanded to be enlightened what the famous Mr. Haskell would think of this family anyhow. But she was the first person dressed as the hour for David's appearance drew nearer, and descended to appropriate the parlor and watch for him, later to entertain him while the balance of the family was putting on its social warpaint, delayed in consequence of these elaborate domestic preparations to receive him. She wore a stiffly starched white apron with a brilliant cerise sash and spent the time in which she watched for his coming in going over the books in the Parker

whatnot in order to discuss general literature with the celebrity and convince the family she was not such a child as they thought.

Willie could not figure out just where he fitted in all this febrile preparation, unless it be to turn the freezer and produce the ice cream. As they left him alone with the stuff in the cellar, he was down—a whole flight down—but not exactly cast down. Naturally it was incumbent upon him as Master Freezer to open the contrivance periodically and sample its contents to see that it was properly congealing. Thus he took an hour and fifty minutes to create a concoction which could have been bought from the local drugstore for forty cents—and was only saved for the dinner by the fact that in the end it approximated ice.

Little Hank, too, was not beyond inoculation by the prevailing infection. He tried to read the Sunday paper and could not. He shifted from chair to chair, ostensibly to get out of Allie's ablative pathway, but really to ease his nerves. Three times before one o'clock he came into the kitchen, stretched his dinky arms above his head, yawned, said, "Well, I guess I'll go be dressin'." But each time, receiving no encouragement, he went back to the parlor, lighted a fresh pipe and looked up with a start when anyone climbed Adams Street hill. It was a hectic day in the Parker household, this entertaining *haute mond* in local journalism.

And then, at four-thirty-seven, *haute mond* arrived.

The modest little repast on which Mrs. Parker had spent herself since morning was not yet finished. The house was only half in order and Allie hadn't started to dress. Willie was below stairs with neck and ears still dirty, sampling the ice cream and thinking of Mississippi River steamboats. Only Ruth was prepared to do the honors. So for once in their lives, the family thought kindly of Ruthy. And when David rang the bell and followed it with a tremendous knocking (because some neighborhood terrors had "busted" the bell), Ruth pulled herself together and went to admit him like a stiffly starched, cerise-bound exponent of Tense Moments in Great Careers.

"Is this where Allie Parker lives?"

Ruth stared, dumfounded. Could it be possible that *this* had upset that household so frenziedly since morning? It was the first time Ruth had seen him. Yes, she stared. She

even gaped. She had vaguely conceived of the famous Mr. Haskell as a tall, dark gentleman in a plug hat and a waxed mustache, with romantic silver at his temples and carrying gloves and cane. Here was just a boy — a *hick*! He couldn't even stand up straight. He had to lean against the doorjamb and try to peer into the house behind her, as though The Family might be somewhere in the shadowy background, secreting themselves behind furniture and daring him to enter and drag them out.

"Are you, now, this David Haskell?"

"Yeah. You Ruth?"

The girl's world wobbled. The social mountain had labored and brought forth a callow titmouse. Yet it was up to her to do the honors somehow; she had to remember her manners and be — nice.

"I am Miss Ruth Parker," she returned with dignity.

"Where's your grown-up sister?"

Ruth flamed scarlet. His use of the term which implied maturity for Allie likewise implied mortifying lack of it for herself.

"You mean Miss *Alicia* Parker?"

"Sure, Allie. Works to the office. She said for me to stroll up here 'safternoon and she'd be on the lookout to have me stop."

"Won't you please come in? And allow me to take your hat and —" Ruthy could not say gloves. All those carefully prepared phrases, gleaned from the Pansy series, went glimmering. She felt herself imposed upon, played with, tricked. Besides, he had no gloves. Just hands!

"Yeah. I'll come in. A few minutes, maybe."

"This way, please. Miss Alice will be down directly." Poor but humble young heroines always said this sort of thing in the novels. Ruth said it, but inside the girl was smoldering. She decided she didn't like this youth. It was too much like having to be nice to — Willie.

David slouched in and having been relieved of his hat, he produced his handkerchief. He wiped his hands with his handkerchief as Ruthy specified a chair. He wiped his face with his handkerchief. Apparently his eyes were tired and gave him some trouble. Anyhow, he wiped them also. Because he was not the type she had expected, Ruth had difficulty recalling her cues. She sat down near the opposite

window, affected dignified impersonality and racked her small head for rehearsed civilities. David scarcely saw her, being occupied with inventory of pictures and bric-a-brac.

In the quarters behind, family dynamics quickened. Henry thrust his narrow shoulders through the kitchen door with an appalling "*He's here!*" Mrs. Parker responded with, "My stars!—and I'm still in a mess and Willie's still in his overalls down cellar pesterin' with the cream." But she thrust her head down the stairs at once, commanding Willie into her presence with the comment that he'd been down there long enough to freeze a dozen creams. And in the next quarter-hour the rear of the premises continued in tumult that only subsided with a final exodus of all and sundry up the steep back stairs.

Meanwhile in the parlor Ruth was doing her best amid the general débris of her illusions to entertain the celebrity while David was countering by casting up the room's appointments. Its coarse-meshed lace curtains were as stiff as a nun's neck linen and most of the space between the two front windows was occupied with an old-fashioned wax-cylindered "talking machine" and a great morning-glory horn on a tripod. Ruth's installment piano took up yet more space on the west side wall and too many chairs of orange upholstery covered with "tidies" made the place a dangerous labyrinth for burglars in the dark. There was a golden oak bookcase and a walnut whatnot, a sprawling fern and a marble-topped table. On the walls were pictures of babies with big collie dogs gazing down at surprised hoptoads, lacy ladies with shameless physical frontage reclining languidly in boudoirs with amorous Colonial gentlemen at their feet, and multiple portraits of ancestral Parkers, hirsute attainments cleverly divided between whiskers and bangs. David rocked nervously in a chair with creaking springs and surveyed these banalities. But Ruth fought with her spleen and wondered if her elder sister were crazy. As for David's opinion of Ruth—after that "Miss Alicia" business at the door, he decided the younger sister was a "gawky little snob trying to put on airs"—and he hoped to heaven she'd vanish at Allie's appearance.

The "gawky little snob" did better than David, however. She conquered her baser instincts and made conversation with arch politeness. She asked as calmly as possible:

"How did you enjoy your experience as pilot on the Mississippi River?"

"Huh?" gasped David.

"I said — how did you enjoy your experience as pilot on the Mississippi River?" Then she added, "I don't care for water myself. It's so — wet."

"Mississippi *River*? I've never been west of Albany in my life!"

It was Ruth's turn to jolt. "Then how on earth could you ever be a humorist?"

"I'm no humorist. Anyhow, what's bein' a humorist got to do with the Mississippi River? That is, unless you fall in deep water and make a funny sploshin', gettin' out."

"I thought — I understood — humorists were men who wrote books after being pilots on the Mississippi River." She bit her lip.

"Gosh! — Mark Twain was a humorist and a pilot on the Mississippi. Is that where you got your idea?"

"Indeed! Any relation of yours?" Ruth felt she must discover something about this *stick* allotting him claims to distinction.

"Heavens, no! What's your older sister doin'? I only got a little time to stop."

"Why! — we're expecting you to stay all the rest of the day and help eat up what Ma's been cooking!" Supposing he should go — really arise and walk out, leave the whole establishment flat, after this hectic day of preparation? Ruth felt with sudden panic it was up to her to hold him if she had to grab his knees. So she stumbled onward, "But if you haven't been a pilot on the Mississippi, what have you been — if it isn't any secret?"

"I haven't been anything — except a sort of farmer, helpin' my dad in Foxboro and writing to earn some money."

Then he *had* written? "What are the names of your books?" she demanded, as though one couldn't be expected to have read them all.

"I haven't written any books! Who said I had?"

"I thought you were a *regular* author. You said you'd written —"

"I'm talkin' about the *Telegraph* — the news from Foxboro!" Why didn't Allie come? What did they mean,

leaving him alone to be entertained by this talkative, inquisitive child?

David was bored. Horribly, hectically, witheringly bored. Maybe he could squelch this garrulous young nuisance with dignified silence. But Ruth "had her stuff to do" and she did it. "If you ever intended to write any books, what would be the source of your inspiration?"

"Gosh, I dunno. I'm not gonna write any books, anyhow. And I wouldn't need any inspiration if I did."

"Don't all writers need inspiration — like a dead sweet-heart or something —?"

"You've been readin' bosh somewheres. When you grow up, you'll see the foolishness of fillin' your head with all such drivel."

If he had slapped her face, he could not have insulted her more. When she grew up, indeed! She had done her best. He was a boor, a yokel, a barbarian. She flamed scarlet again and regarded him now with open scorn.

"Ruth, your mother wants you upstairs!"

David breathed in blessed relief. It was Allie. She had come down at last.

Ruth marched out with nose in the air. She was no less thankful than David for the sister's appearance. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting, but I had to help mother," Allie explained.

David assayed Allie. She was easy to assay. She had negotiated the frilled frock and added ribbons. Her hair was done up high; never was the dent in her pink neck so pretty. The boy suppressed an urge to be afraid by recalling that this was the girl who had sewed his trousers. He felt again for his handkerchief: there was more hand wiping. Then, as quickly, he must go and look at her flowers.

He looked at her flowers and praised them from the standpoint of the practical horticulturist. They strolled about the Parker premises. After Alice had allowed a reasonable time for her parents to descend, they returned to the parlor. They found Little Hank down first, dressed with the painful laboriousness of an honest and respectable merchant, in a rumpled black suit, a hard-boiled shirt and a celluloid collar.

He now sat stiffly in one of the chairs, awaiting the return of the flower inspectors. But he stared, as Ruth had stared, when he beheld not a man of the world who knew humor in all its branches but a mere stripling whose hair parting

had become misplaced and whose tie was slightly down from his collar.

"This is my father," announced Allie with a wave of her hand as lecturers indicate waxworks.

David mumbled a conventional "pleeztermeecher," shook Hank's bony little hand and sank back in his former place in the chair.

"Fine weather we're havin'," was Henry's pronouncement.

"But it looked rather cloudy as I came up the hill."

"It does occasionally cloud up, Sundays," Henry responded.

"Yesterday's forecast for the comin' week said Fair and Warmer."

"Forecasts ain't so much as a rule. Mostly wrong."

Allie had vanished upstairs once more to hurry down her mother. So came three minutes of distressing silence. David began to wonder which might be worse, being left alone with Ruth's loquacity or abandoned to Little Hank's reticence.

The boy felt that the father did not dislike him. Still, he was subsequently grateful when more footsteps were heard descending the staircase. Allie's mother had finished her toilet, gripped her courage and trailed down after the daughter to meet the fellow who might be "one of the family through all the future years." Such things happened.

"This," declared Allie, as though exhibiting a second waxwork, "is my mother."

Mrs. Parker in her turn was slightly disappointed. He was *such* a boy! Yet she could be exceedingly gracious on occasion, though she usually overdid it.

"I am pleased to meet such an eminent author," she pronounced, "and to welcome him to our humble family circle." A neat little speech. She had rehearsed it nervously while getting into her best black dress.

David arose and gave out that he in turn was pleased to meet Mrs. Parker. In fact on this auspicious occasion, everyone present seemed graciously pleased to meet everyone else. It was an afternoon of general pleasure and they all sat down to partake of it.

"You like Paris?" suggested Mrs. Parker next, seeming to hold her breath on the possibility that he might not like Paris.

David affirmed that he did like Paris and Mrs. Parker crooned a pleasant concurring "Yes!"

"And you like it at the newspaper office?"

David similarly liked it at the newspaper office and was crooned in substance as before.

"And you like Mr. Hod to work for?"

David liked Mr. Hod to work for, was properly crooned and shot his cuffs. In fact, it developed he liked everything and everyone that Mother Parker mentioned. She did not mention her younger daughter, however; thus was David relieved of a certain embarrassment.

When Mother Parker had nearly exhausted the things which David liked, a bit of diverting byplay was injected into the intercourse by the advent of Willie.

Willie had succeeded in washing neck and ears and donning proper Sabbath habiliments. But being too bashful to descend and be presented at once, Master Willie had hung around the top of the flight, cavorted on the highest stair, spiraled on the upper newel post and wondered if he could negotiate the feat of sliding down the banisters on his stomach.

Suddenly, however — cavorting, spiraling and wondering a bit too indiscreetly, trying to lie down on the top of the banisters in such manner as he would experiment concretely the following day — the youngster missed his clutch. The banisters were smooth. With a wail of dismay, down them he plunged.

As an experiment in descending from second stories to ground floors its success was problematical. For Willie contrived to maintain equilibrium the first twelve feet and then no more. Off into space he went — sideways. David and the older Parkers were treated to the harrowing spectacle of a young male offspring caroming against the opposite wall and thumping down the flight to the bottom. Whereupon he staggered to his feet and began whirling crazily; also he lifted up his voice in a great lamentation:

"My back's broke! And besides, I bit my tongue!"

Mother Parker leaped up and clutched him; she felt his back, decided that nothing worse ailed him than a broken blouse string and urgent need of a handkerchief. So she supplied the latter and told him to stop his noise. "This is Mister David Haskell," she announced, "come to see all of

us and stay to supper," as though the family had not known it hysterically all that blessed day. "What a way to introduce yourself to company! You ought to be ashamed."

"I slipped," announced Willie. And he thrust out his tongue as far as it would thrust and felt it over carefully with his fingers.

"Well, shake hands with Mister Haskell and say you're glad he is with us this afternoon."

"Glad — see — yer," imparted Willie stiffly — eyes elsewhere. "Maw, look an' see if it's cut in half!" He referred to his tongue. "I might bleed to death and swallow all the blood and never know it."

"Go and sit down," ordered Henry. "And instead of bitin' your tongue, *hold it!*"

CHAPTER IX

WANDERING FIRES

David was meeting the family. Individually and collectively, David was meeting the family.

Moreover, in meeting the family, each of its members reacted precisely as they would continue to react throughout the length and breadth of their mutual acquaintance.

Allie sponsored him and Ruth despised him. Henry tolerated him and Mrs. Parker crooned over him. Willie contacted him principally in catapults from startling and unexpected quarters, usually with painful and expensive results.

It nettled David grievously, however, that whereas he had accepted Allie's invitation to Sunday tea on the assumption that he was to enjoy a reasonable portion of the proof-reader's time — outside those moments when they had looked at her flowers he had scarcely addressed half a dozen paragraphs to Allie since arrival. Not that she had tiff or mood responsible for this negligence; merely that she was so busy helping her mother she found small time to attend upon the lad she was honoring.

So following the evening meal there were dishes to be washed and ninety-two per cent. of the prodigious supper to be salvaged. David sat in the front room alone, not unappreciative of what all these good people had tried to do in his behalf yet mildly resentful that he had come to call on a family circle instead of its most eligible female offspring. Henry intimated important duties requiring attention that Sabbath night at his store. Ruth was across on the opposite Carpenter steps, telling the Carpenter twins she had privately discovered the celebrity a quince. Willie had negotiated the roof of the barn, trying to bag a strange pigeon which had strayed into his cote along with a dozen of his own. So David read a book, "Wonders of the Natural World," which he discovered on the whatnot. And waited.

It was nearly seven o'clock when Alice finally entered and

declared, "Well, that's that! Poor Maw's worn out. What do you say we go to church?"

David thought evening attendance on divine service an excellent idea, providing they go together and not take the family — although he did not phrase it with quite so much candor.

"Maw's too worn out to go," the daughter explained. "You wait till I change my dress and we'll hoof it."

The valley was fragrant with the wash of countless showers — warm summer showers that awoke a thousand entrancing odors from shrubs and sod. The arc lamps came on as they strolled up Beech Street and turned into Main. They joined the little knots of threes and fours whose focal point was Calvary Methodist church across from the park. Together they entered the edifice and side by side found a pew. Whereat the Parisians present raised their eyebrows and smiled or frowned.

"That's the feller that writes the funny stuff on the *Telegraph*," was the general comment behind fans or hymnals. "And that's Allie Parker with him, who proofreads the paper. She must have bagged him already. Wonder if he's here as a church-goer or will he write a funny piece to-morrow on Doctor Dodd, making light of sacred things?" Whether they considered Pastor Dodd a sacred thing was not made clear by this comment, but many a pious soul searched the paper anxiously the following evening — only to find an article by David on Old Tom Cannon, our crippled Army man; Old Tom, it seems, had once ordered a new wooden leg by mail from Chicago and received a woman's limb in error and worn it seven years without discovering the firm's mistake.

It was David's first public appearance with Allie, however, and its import was heavy upon him. Allie bent her head on entering the pew and said a prayer, so he noted that in addition to being a considerate and hard-working daughter she was likewise God-fearing and devout. He parked his new hat beneath the pew seat, where it worked out later when they had to shove along to accommodate two toothless old ladies. And one of the latter inadvertently wiped her left foot on the hat from the collection to the doxology and her right foot from doxology to benediction.

Allie, however, found the hymns and held her side of the

hymn book with neatly gloved hand and David added to the vocal pandemonium with the best of those present. There was a prayer and a collection and a need — expressed from the pulpit — for attending on the interests of certain Ethiopians on the west coast of somewhere or other — anyhow, there were Ethiopians and they needed something — which they wouldn't get till times were better. Then came more singing and finally a benediction. David and Alice made their way into the streets of soft summer night and David walked two blocks before Allie noticed what the old lady's feet had done to his hat.

A light shower had fallen during the service; all the world was moist and mystic. A gentle evening breeze stirred the leaves of the maples in the after-guard of the rainfall. No moon showed as yet, but here and there bright stars were gleaming through ragged patches of parting cloud.

And the perfume of flowers hung on the air like an opiate, — old-fashioned flowers sweet with evening rain.

"It's a wonderful night, too wonderful to go back home just yet," said Allie. "Supposing we walk."

So they strolled up East Main Street under the somnolent maples, over the Vermont Central tracks by the Process Works and through the ghostly covered bridge that spanned the swirling, workaday river.

Neither felt talkative at first, the boy especially. Not because of his constitutional reticence in propinquity with Allie but because something was happening to him this night that had not happened before.

There had been girls at Foxboro Academy who had caused him hours of heartburn, especially one shy little thing with eyes too big for her face who had "corresponded" with him via an oak tree letter box for most of one summer. Though they reached the "till death do us part" stage in early July, when they met in person he was always "Mister Haskell" and she was "Miss Barnes." Later her folks moved down to Greenfield and he had heard of her marriage to a rising young baggage smasher.

But Allie Parker was a woman grown. Physically he was man grown also, though he had scarcely sensed it, his maturity had been so subtle. There originated much of this mystery he could not comprehend as he strolled along

beside the willowy, small-town proofreader, daring on occasions to touch and guide her elbow.

The world had suddenly become big and vast and wondrous. Life had the intrigue of an enchantment. He was a man at last, attained to man's estate, drawing a man's financial emoluments. And he had this woman — this woman of whom he was not afraid.

From the eastern end of the bridge stretched a long level space of open country, Marshall mill-pond bottom, colloquially known as the "flats." Allie and David continued on across the flats. Now and then auto headlights "picked them up" from ahead or in rear. But most of the time they were two silhouettes in clearing starlight, treading slowly along where the delicate rain had laid the dust.

"Have you been lonesome since you came to Paris?" Allie asked at length, hands in gossamer pockets, eyes on the ground.

"Gosh, no! How could a fellow ever be lonesome with so much goin' on?"

"I mean, haven't you been at all homesick for Foxboro?"

"Well, I sort o' miss Dad at times, if that's what you mean."

"I've always lived at home. Sometimes I feel as though I could miss Ruth or Willie and not mind it in the least."

David concurred with her avidly, especially in the matter of Ruth. He could miss Ruth through a couple of eons and never shed a tear as large as a mustard seed. "Of course a father's different," he added.

Allie agreed that parents were exceptions in everything. As for her, were she to lose her father, she wouldn't know what on earth she would do. But were she to lose her *mother*, she was certain she would lie right down and die on the spot. Her mother had been good to her, David learned. Her mother had also "been through a lot," though just what it was that Mrs. Henry Parker had "been through" and why and where, was not made clear for the present. Allie said it with an air of forlorn mystery, however, as though the woman had survived a bloody revolution, a plague or a shipwreck, or stood by her diminutive husband through periodic orgies of hopeless debauch.

"All the same," sighed Allie at length, "it's not like hav-

ing one's own home, is it? The sort of thing you saw this afternoon. Ruth, for instance."

"No, it isn't!" snapped Dave with vigor. "I could understand why Ruth would be fierce to have stickin' around all the time."

"She's terribly dragging," observed Allie. "And Willie makes so much noise and gets into *such* scrapes. Sometimes I wish I could take poor mother and just go away to an island in the sea."

"Whatcher want your mother along for?"

"To take her away from it all — from the family — and give her a chance to *live*."

"But it's her family, isn't it?"

"But being a woman myself, with Paw so much a failure, I can understand how she feels."

"Your Pa's a failure?"

"Oh — ghastly."

"I thought he had a pretty good business; what I've seen from the outside since I've been here."

"He's never been successful. From the day he married poor mother he's never been successful. Oh, he does enough business, after a fashion. But he never keeps books or remembers what anything cost him. He buys whatever he can get — on credit — and sells whatever people want to buy, asking whatever he thinks it's worth. Of course it's always worth more than he thinks. There isn't a single, blessed price tag in all that jumbled mess; he carries everything in his head."

"Too bad some good business person couldn't step in and straighten it out. He must have a lot of money invested."

"Eight or ten thousand dollars, Maw and I estimated. Yet there hasn't been a day since they were married that Paw hasn't owed his bills." This, apparently, was what Mrs. Henry Parker had "been through."

"Yet he's kept his head above water; he ought to get credit for that."

"Maw's often said she wished one of us girls would get married to a man who'd go into the store and take hold of father and straighten him out. But it's like a lot of other things that Maw's had in her life — only dreams. She's probably got to die right there in that house on Adams Street. Think of it! It almost makes me cry."

"It isn't a bad lookin' house to die in."

"Oh, I'm not talking about its *looks*!"

"But we all got to die sometime. Come right down to it, the place doesn't matter."

"When I think how ambitious Maw was once — and how pretty — and to look how faded she's got and how she never has enough money to do the things she likes ——"

"What does she want to do?"

"Well, nothing especially, except live in a better style than you saw in our house to-day ——"

"I didn't see nothin' the matter. I thought it looked pretty comfortable."

Allie glanced up quickly. After a time she addressed the distant silhouette of Haystack Mountain. "Did you? Well, you just ought to see the home I intend to make for the man I marry."

David felt a strange constriction about his heart. "I bet it'll be a peach," he blurted out.

"A girl can't help dreaming about such things — and laying plans."

"But you can't do much without money."

"The man I marry will make the money — or at least have the prospects," announced Allie determinedly. "Do you know that right now, when you're only starting out, you're making more money every week than Paw's averaged all his married life?"

"Eighteen dollars a week?"

"I'll bet Paw hasn't averaged twelve."

"Gosh! And raised all you youngsters?"

Allie nodded — stiffly. "You can imagine what poor Maw has had to put up with."

"I'd say they both done pretty well."

"But think what Mother *might* have done, if she'd had the money. Look at Mrs. John Preston up on Preston Hill. She and Maw went to school together. And she's got her big house and her car and her servants ——"

"But she didn't make it, did she? She married it."

"Precisely. But she knew what to do with it after she married it."

"You mean she knew how to spend it?"

Allie was vaguely nettled at this. She snapped, "All Maw's had is babies and work!"

"But she didn't *have* to marry your father, did she? Unless somebody made her!"

"N-N-No. But it's the woman always suffers when she draws a blank for a husband — a man that can't get ahead."

David subscribed to this and felt lofty. The country night was increasingly sensuous about them. Under foot the roadway was mealy soft — and cool. Occasionally a blackberry frond reached out and scratched at their clothing as they passed. Night insects were musical in the undergrowth. Across the open space of the flats the night wind carried the sense of rush grass, dank water, rotting wood, all mingled with sweet fern and broken milkweed. Aside from the insects, the silence was eternal.

They wandered another half-mile and sensations began playing in the boy of which he grew afraid. Several times the girl brushed against him. Once he helped her around a tiny little puddle which she would have leaped had she not been with him. When he put his hand under her arm, she pressed it between her elbow and her side. Her body was far softer and more yielding than one might suppose to look at some of her angles. And the occasional frou-frou of her gossamer coat was not unpleasant. He felt nakedly *alone* with her, out here in this stretch of vast country quiet, Paris, lights prinkling faintly across the river behind them.

"How long you worked at the *Telegraph* office?" he asked her finally, mostly for want of something to say.

David went home, however, to toss all night on his bed.

What ailed him? Why wouldn't sleep come? He was startled by the instincts arising within him.

Along toward morning he made the discovery that he was hungry. "Now if this was only my own house — my own *home* —" he argued, "I could march right down to the pantry now and get whatever I wanted." He fell to thinking of the advantages of living in a domicile that was strictly one's own. He pictured Allie's willowy figure lying sleepily beside him in the bed. His *wife*! He imagined her rolling her head indolently and asking him where he was going. He heard himself replying manfully, "Whatcher got down in the pantry that's fit for a man to put in his stomach?"

Yes, possessing a home of his own had its points. Then, like a galvanic shock, prickling his scalp, curling his

naked toes, came the sudden realization, "By gorry, I'm makin' enough money to get such a home and keep it up, *right this minute!*"

Somehow such imageries to date had always been of the future, when he became a "man", when he "grew up." He *had* grown up. He had become a man, scarcely realizing it. He was drawing eighteen dollars every Saturday night. Nothing on earth prevented him from marrying Allie Parker or any other girl to-morrow morning if he so elected.

"I got to quit this. It's bosh!" he told himself — or addressed the semi-lighted room where the late moonshine was now flooding in through the casement window. "I can't think of gettin' married. I got those papers to buy out and get runnin' at a profit, first."

And yet the phantasy persisted. He wondered, as he finally dozed off, if across the town, in a similar bed, Allie Parker was thinking similar thoughts as she gazed into similar moonlight.

She was! Only more of them!

CHAPTER X

CONCERNING ELEPHANTS

"Big Jim" Thorne, president of the Thorne Knitting Mills, the People's National Bank, the Paris County Fish and Game Association, and director in a score of corporate enterprises which rarely lost people money, prided himself on being a selfmade man.

Back in the days when he was a dye-room foreman he had taken to wife a little rabbit of a woman named Winship and in the years 1907-1908 she still abode with him, though through their married lives she had withered and grown smaller in exactly the ratio that Big Jim had prospered and grown bigger.

No one ever saw much of Big Jim's wife. In a great graystone mausoleum on upper Vermont Avenue she was assumed to pass her days and nights. "She enjoyed the best of poor health," the village expressed it and on those rare occasions when she was seen in the Thorne limousine about the valley, a maid or a nurse was ever in attendance.

David had not been in Paris a week without discovering that the Little Toy Lady who had ridden into town with him that first morning had been bound thither to act as companion to this same Mrs. Thorne. He got the item himself from old Doctor Johnson—who has ever been a prolific source of news for young reporters on our staff—and who was responsible not only for Mrs. Thorne's weekly health but the suggestion that such a companion might appreciably improve it. In which he was not wholly in error.

David learned other things about the Flynt girl—though only by merest chance that first summer and autumn did he encounter her about the village on errands for her patroness. Her widowed father had gone to Arizona "for his lungs"; he had died there and left her to be raised by grandparents—Joel Price and his "woman" over at the Crossing. When David heard this, he felt strangely sympathetic. Somehow her experience possessed points of similarity with his own.

But on coming to Paris to face the world alone, Thorne

Hedge had opened and encased her — like one of those horrible man-eating plants of Madagascar, he thought, before he came to know the Thornes as friends. Day after day, week after week, month after month, Carrie lived quietly in the lugubrious stone pile and cared for the ailing millionairess. And Dave wondered how she stood it.

On one epochal occasion they had met in Alec Potherton's shoe store. Dave had ambled in after morning items. Carrie had been encountered sitting on one of the smooth settee benches, one shoe off, waiting for Alec to hunt her a special style of oxford in the basement. They had greeted one another stiffly at first — then mutual inquiries brought a half-hour visit. During this visit, the girl flushed crimson seven times by David's count. He could not tell how many times before he began his count.

When the Ladies' Aid of Calvary Church gave an entertainment in February — which Dave attended with Allie — he had been accidentally seated just behind her and Mrs. Thorne and he stared for an evening at the wondrous cascade of ringlets down her dainty blue-frocked back. It was hit and miss, touch and go, between them all the fall and winter now ensuing. She was not exactly a ship which passed in the night; she was more a fragile little yacht on a wide green ocean which went dancing past on shimmering water and gradually might be expected to dissolve down sunlit distance.

Anyhow, fall and winter passed — with David's inimitable write-ups a daily feature of our paper and the boy a fixture in the town. The year 1908 came upon us — in which springtime the boy came to know the Thornes more intimately.

David had heard no more of the Fish and Game newspaper blunder after that one evening's excoriation from Big Jim by 'phone. Gradually his terror of a reaction had worn itself away even as the tragedy of the Whalen girl's incarceration and his part in it had dissolved in his increasing regard for the *Telegraph's* proofreader. And yet one May noontime, left alone by chance in the office, the reporter turned to jellied ice when he heard a ponderous step on the threshold and raised his eyes to behold Big Jim regarding him with an eye as baleful as the Seven Plagues in descent on Egypt.

"Well?" questioned Jim. Never had his mouth looked so much like a button.

"It's a nice day."

"So you remarked once before in my office."

"But that was a nice day, too!"

"The way you keep track of the weather is brain-shattering!"

"It rains sometimes, though. Then it isn't so nice."

"*Blaa!*" said the fat man — and David felt it to his marrow.

"Could I do anything for you, Mr. Thorne?"

"Yes. Every time I heave in sight, quit talking about the weather. Made any more fool mistakes on this paper lately?"

"I didn't make a mistake the first time. It was the stone-man's fault. He pried a galley. The proofreader fixed it, though ——"

Big Jim frowned sharply. He took a step nearer and Dave almost squealed. "Why haven't you kept that date?"

"Date?"

"Thought you was going to take me fishin' where I could hook some nifty bass?"

"B-B-But over the phone you s-s-said ——"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I expected you'd knock off my block —— !"

"My Gawd!" wailed Jim. "Have you still got that complex about you and your skull getting separated?"

"I'd be tickled stiff to show you if you'd only give me the chance. I mean about the bass."

"Young man, what the devil ails you, anyhow? Have you got St. Vitus' dance?"

"N-N-No, sir. I'm just relieved you're not sore at that piece in the paper. I thought when you came in you were goin' to knock off my ——" But luckily he caught himself as Jim Thorne gave alarming symptoms of reaching for an inkwell. "I mean, I thought you were comin' to get satisfaction."

"I *am* here to get satisfaction — about them bass."

"Could you go to-morrow mornin'?" suggested Dave, wondering how he dared it.

"I could go the hour of my own funeral if it was two

o'clock this afternoon. Where do I pick you up? Where do you live?"

"With Mrs. Brooks. In Seaver Court."

"Well, I'll be there at four o'clock in the morning. Got an alarm clock?"

"I don't need an alarm clock. I'll sit up all night."

David remained rigid for ten minutes after the elephantine manufacturer had departed. He and the great Jim Thorne going on a fishing trip together — and *alone*! He had an air of large importance the balance of that afternoon which puzzled Allie and nettled Sam Hod.

Small need had the Thorne chauffeur, however, for waking up the Seaver Court neighborhood with his horn next morning. At four o'clock the boy was on the steps, where he had waited half the night, appropriately garbed for the epochal expedition.

He discovered Big Jim in the back of the high mole-colored limousine in a dirty felt hat pulled down rakishly on his hairless pate, a suit of rumpled canvas and huge rubber boots. The floor of the motor was cluttered with tackle. Jim made fishing a business.

"Now, then, where do we go?" he demanded, when the heavy door was satisfactorily slammed. "God help you if you lead me to some bog hole that's got nothing in it but frogs!"

"Drive to Foxboro Center first. Then we turn off toward Hebron. The best bass fishin' I know of is up to Simonds Lake."

"Simonds Lake? Never heard of it."

"That's why the bass fishin's probably good."

Despite his appearance of a mountain wrapped in dun canvas, Big Jim was jolted. "Is that a boost or a knock?" he demanded. But the palace car on rubber tires backed from the Court, turned into Beech Street, got out to East Main and soon was rumbling over the river.

What a machine! As it settled down into soft-toned speed across the flats and took the grade beyond McDermott's with a mighty purring, David relaxed on its cushions deliciously. Such a car he would own as soon as he established that string of newspapers. His large importance increased as they coasted down the eastern side of Cobb Hill and Big Jim's titanic carcass lolled easily on the curves. The

social discrepancy between them dissolved. After all, there is a freemasonry about a fishing trip maintaining in no other situation in which the human male arrives. Jim produced two cigars.

"Have one?" he suggested to David, proffering a weed nearly as black as charcoal.

"Don't mind if I do. Thanks," and David accepted the gift with the vast gesture of men of the world embarking on a program of original sin.

"Got some hooch in the bag," remarked Jim, with a thrust of his big rubber boot at his tackle. "Ever drink?"

A fleeting twinge of panic seized David. This was being of the world worldly, with a vengeance. So when his tumult had subsided and he had collected himself, he returned airily, "Naw — I'm on the wagon just at present." He had so heard the point turned in respect of abstinence.

"Nothing like a good stiff swig of hooch at times, especially on a fishing trip. A fellow might fall in the water."

"That's right," Dave agreed hastily. He hoped Big Jim wouldn't open that Hathaway mishap afresh. He accepted the match-flame which Jim held out and tried doggedly to get the cigar afire. Something was wrong.

"Bite off the tip, you fool," Jim ordered.

Dave hastened to bite off the tip and tore off a section of wrapper. The smoke immediately went up his nose, nearly strangling him.

"Won't make you sick, will it?"

"Course not," the boy returned haughtily. "What brand is it?"

"Double Corona," Big Jim answered.

"Mighty good cigar," the boy affirmed. He held it off and surveyed it like a connoisseur. He was sincere in this interest. He was wondering how much of it he could manage before requesting the chauffeur to stop the car suddenly.

He was astounded, however, at what brief time it took to reach Foxboro. Four or five hours it usually required; David had required six to drive into town that first morning. The limousine pummeled through Foxboro's main street in less than forty minutes. There they turned northeast, up toward Hebron. The boy regretted the hour was so early. Why couldn't it have been the middle of the forenoon so sundry former acquaintances might observe them? He fan-

cied Jeff Somers looking after the magnificent motor and remarking, "Jim Thorne's car. But who's that with him?" And he heard Jake Whipple say offhandedly, "Oh, that's Dave Haskell. Thorne's a friend of his. Guess they're off on a little fishin' trip together." And Jeff might counter, "I remember when Dave was only a barefoot kid runnin' through this village. Beats the Dutch how some folks get ahead, don't it?" — Yes, David regretted that Foxboro was still sleeping.

They entered the high wooded country north of the Center and came out past Drinkwater's farm.

"Referrin' to the subject of women," Dave said largely as he worried what would become of the half-inch of white ash on the Double Corona. "You know the Parker family in Paris? What do you think of 'em? — Henry Parker in particular?"

"You mean that turkey-necked little coot who runs The Jumble Shop?"

This was a somewhat disturbing way of naming one's possible father-in-law. Yet David nodded. He wished the chauffeur would ride the mountain "thank-you-ma'ams" with a motion less like a ship at sea.

"Got about as much business brains as a Patagonian truck-driver. But what's he got to do with women?"

"Oh," said David carelessly, tapping off the cigar ash before he gave thought, "I'm thinkin' of marryin' one of his daughters."

"The hell you are!" Jim acted as though he wanted to add something about his companion being still damp behind his auditory organs — but desisted.

"Well, a man likes a home of his own at times."

"Does he?" demanded Jim and turned his button-mouthed face away. "Which one you aiming to commit this breach of discretion with, anyhow?"

"You mean which Parker girl? Why, there's only one who's marriageable. The other's just a — child!"

"Allie?"

"You know her?"

"Lord, Allie come pretty near being *my* daughter — if once on a time Hank hadn't owned a better buggy. How long you known Allie?"

"Oh — quite a long time. She's real domestic." David

did not consider it necessary to mention how he had learned it.

"What's your folks think of you getting married so young?"

The matter of Youth had not entered into the circumstance to date. In fact, David had considered his years rather weighty. He replied, "Haven't mentioned it to 'em yet. There's only my father, anyhow. And sooner or later he's gonna need a home."

"Mother dead?"

"N-N-No. Not exactly."

"Where is she?"

"She and father — separated — several years ago."

Jim turned about in sharp interest. "Say, are you the son of that woman who run off with her husband's hired man?"

The boy swallowed dryly. "Yes," he admitted.

Jim muttered something about too damned bad. The lad beside him was big enough physically but — somehow there was much of the overgrown child about him, pitifully eager to show a knowledge of the world he did not possess. And thereafter the fat man acted less brutal.

"And because dad 'll need a home some time it occurred to me —"

"You'd let the old duffer come and live on you? Don't do it, son. Get married if you want to — provided you're sure you get the right girl. When relatives come in at the door, romance flies out of the window. Always remember that. I ought to charge you money for that advice. But seeing you won't take it, I'll let you have it gratis."

David laughed — the free, easy, unaffected laugh of confident youth. "I'm not worryin' over relatives. Let 'em all come — all they want! I'll show 'em!"

"Your wife might have something to say about that."

It was pleasant to the auditory organs, regardless of their rear aridity or lack of it, to thus have another person refer to one's wife — somehow as though one possessed such a lady already. And yet David was soon preoccupied with the interior status of his physical equilibrium. He became conscious that this limousine had aggravatingly easy springs. Some of its downward rushes into Hebron and beyond were like being dropped from the top of an exceeding high build-

ing in an elevator — an express — with no stops for passengers.

"T-T-Tell your m-m-man to t-t-take the next cross road to the left," he directed faintly. "And take it slowly. It's terribly hot in a limousine, ain't it?"

"It's the engine," Jim advised. And unintentionally he blew a great cloud of gray smoke in the boy's ashen face.

Speaking of little incidents throwing big switches — it is to be doubted if anything more propitious could have occurred in David's favor than the five scaly beauties that were finally inveigled into Big Jim's landing net that day on Lake Simonds. The man came home with the exaltation of a child — almost as pleased a child as David — and lugged his catch up to his wife's chamber before shedding his jacket or boots.

"D-D-Did Mr. Haskell catch any?" asked Carrie timidly, although at other times, concerning other people, timidity was not exactly a weakness with this Little Toy Lady. Dignity, yes. But not timidity.

"He got seven," admitted Jim. "But I got the biggest!" He surveyed the dead, smelly things, rapidly filling his wife's dainty chamber with an atmosphere remindful of Pressey's Market.

"You ought to, James. You're bigger and older," his wife decided. "Where is this young gentleman?"

"Dropped him off to the Widder's," said the husband. "They'll eat bass for a week."

"I should like you to bring him up sometime. Carrie's been telling me he came to Paris the same morning as herself. He even gave her a ride in his buggy."

"That so?" demanded Jim. He chanced to catch sight of the young girl's face. He laughed — wickedly. "No chance, Carrie! He's hooked already."

"Hooked?" repeated Carrie faintly, her color fanning.

"Gonna marry Hank Parker's eldest girl — or so I inferred. I kidded him about it all the way over to the lake this mornin'."

Carrie Flynt stood very still a moment. Then she sucked in her upper lip between her teeth with a fortifying little habit she had, and bit down upon it.

"O-ho!" boomed Big Jim. "So that's the way the land

lies? Well, if you want him, you better shake yourself, little lady. He's almost ready for the net — when she's played him long enough and got him properly drowned."

"I — haven't said — I wanted him!"

"Face o' yours looks as if you wanted something! What you turnin' so red about?"

"Oh — he's a nice boy," said Carrie as indifferently as possible.

"Don't know but what I agree with you there. I'll say I love him like my own — already!"

"James Thorne," cried his wife desperately, "get those awful-smellin' fishes out of my bedroom or I'll think I'm sleepin' to-night on Atlantic Avenue, Boston."

Jim obeyed and did not see the two again till dinner the following evening. He noticed little Carrie's eyes looked swollen.

He had never seen them so before. It saddened him. And Big Jim Thorne was not often saddened.

CHAPTER XI

THE PERFECT CRIME

While the Parkers were an average Paris family and their domicile an average Paris home in consequence, it could scarcely be held as lacking variety in its appointments. A dozen times a month in the summer which now ensued, David looked upon it and marveled how a family budget of twelve or fifteen weekly dollars could have gathered together so much. Henry Parker and his spouse, by the way, like every much-married couple, also looked upon it and marveled the same marvel.

The tall, narrow front hall of The Jig-Saw House was done in imitation walnut and reeked of cheap varnish—especially when the furnace “got away” from the ministrations of Little Hank in the winter and its heat blistered the woodwork ruinously. On the right of this hallway, steep, carpeted stairs mounted to chambers above.

On the right of the hallway opened the parlor and back of the parlor double doors revealed the dining room. This apartment held a golden oak dining table, cherry dining chairs and a black walnut sideboard with a marble top. On this sideboard was red glass with white warts, fancy blue dishes, a blown-glass center-piece of a basket of fruit. A castor still functioned in the middle of the red-clothed dining table; between meals the plates were laid face downward and the cutlery built in triangular pyramids behind. Beside the castor stood a little glass plug hat, inverted, whose crown held toothpicks for whosoever desired toothpicks when the time for toothpicks had set in.

The remaining rooms followed suit. In the kitchen an alarm clock with brassy tick set over the kitchen sink and an acrid odor of kerosene and stove polish underneath. A mammoth range, a generous clothes rack always filled with ironed clothes which scented the place comfortably, and a coal scuttle—the bane of Master Willie’s existence—were its predominating features. There was also the sofa: Mrs.

Parker used it to rest upon a dozen times a day when her "pore feet had plumb give out." Willie used it to con-tort upon when lacing his shoes in the morning and Ruth utilized it to cast her wraps upon in a crumple when she sailed through the house for edibles after school. On the sofa old Henry reclined each night and read our little local daily, with toe joints creaking comfortably. The sofa, in short, was a general epitome of the family's social status.

There were other rooms in The Jig-Saw House but they were merely rooms. The chambers above held white iron beds with the corner knobs all dented artlessly and springs sagging in the center, where Willie played circus on rainy days.

On a Saturday morning a year and one month from David's advent in Paris, Willie brought the Higgins Airedale into the house in violation of family admonition and the Higgins Airedale took note of the Parker tiger cat in a manner at once precipitating a crisis. Mrs. Parker being absent and all the doors on the lower floor open, the cat shot up the steep front stairs like a streak of gray lightning. It entered Allie's bedroom.

The order under Allie's bed was (1) cat, (2) dog, (3) Willie. All of which contributed to a Situation. So much so that the cat quickly shifted it to the conjugal chamber of the elder Parkers. There the hysterical feline went through a two-dollar window pane with celerity and éclat. It remained the next three hours at the top of the tree in the Parker front yard.

Willie heard his mother coming and escape was barred. He remained in innocuous desuetude beneath the bed. Thence, glancing upward, was plainly to be seen twixt mattress and spring something which puzzled Master Willie exceedingly. This something resembled a packet of letters. Mrs. Parker being interested in a broken window pane and a strange dog running frantically through the house, Willie had ample time to extract the packet, untie its ribbons and examine its contents at leisure. Soon it dawned on Master Willie Parker that a prize had befallen his small, stubby fingers.

"Mush!" he ejaculated. "Mush that somebody's written to Allie!" And he further felt called to learn the writer's identity.

He did it so well, in fact, that almost an hour elapsed before he descended once more to the floor below. He had a story prepared for his elders — that the glass must have been broken by a strong wind, or perhaps some neighborhood youth had shot it with an air rifle. Willie was a past master at not knowing exactly how things happened. Yet his air of greatly injured innocence was unnecessary; he met, not his mother, but his sister Ruthy.

"Betcher dunno what I found!" he jeered at this person.

"No. And I don't care!"

"Betcher'd care if you only knew what it was."

"Willie Parker, if you've been rummagin' in my room —"

"Not — your room — *Allie's!* Lookit! Letters! I found 'em between her spring an' mattress."

Ruth Parker, rinsing her fingers at the kitchen faucet, bothered with no towel. In her own case, she knew well enough what letters between her spring and mattress would have meant. She seized upon them violently and Willie scuffled. A moment later Ruth looked at Willie horrified.

"That — *Pill* — has been writin' letters to Allie. About love — and marriage!"

"*Pill?*" Willie's acquaintance with the word had to do with small round capsules swallowed when one was ill — first being firmly pinched by the nose. "Aw, gimme 'em. I gotta put 'em back. Allie'll be sore when she finds 'em gone!"

"Give 'em to *you?* I see myself!"

"Whatcher gonna do with 'em?"

"What do you think I'm goin' to do with 'em? I'm goin' to read 'em."

"Aw, there ain't nothin' in 'em but mush!"

This, of course, was precisely why Ruth intended to read them. She fled to her room and banged the door. It had a lock and she used it. She read David's letters.

For David had been writing letters to the daughter of the house of Parker. They ranged from the briefest of notes left clandestinely on the proofreader's desk, asking if she would go with him to the Opera House of an evening to the loftiest sentiments of the human soul. And letter by letter his epistles had grown bolder. He said in that correspondence what his tongue-tied soul could not utter in speech for

fear of getting tangled in his adverbs. A letter told of the glowing trip to the Simonds Lake with Jim Thorne and how Jim had caught the prize bass of the year. Another described his visit to Thorne Hedge at Jim's solicitation, where he had met the invalid, Mrs. Thorne. This letter also spoke witheringly of a small, dark-eyed girl with a cleft chin and saucy snub nose who "cared" for Mrs. Thorne. "But I don't really like her," he had confided to Allie. "She strikes me as being too darned bossy for her size."

But when David commenced drawing comparisons between the Flynt baggage and Allie herself, Ruthy held her breath. The younger sister became advised that David considered the little nurse as clay beneath the heel beside this daughter of the house of Parker. He said so — in language leaving nothing to the poets.

Now the family as a whole, and particularly Ruth, having dwelt with Alicia since the years of her pigtailed, accepted their eldest girl's fair looks with certain reservations. Beauty is only such when it belongs to some one who is not a relative, anyhow. They knew in a general way that sundry persons had declared that Allie was "nice" and others added that she was "clever" and "capable." They appreciated after a fashion the big-sisterly patience which is the heritage of girls whose character is smelted in the crucible of domestic trial with smaller brothers and sisters.

But to the conviction held in David's quarter, that Allie was "a fragile flower born 'neath mountain stars," "a princess with a soft-tressed crown of gold" or "a breath of rare perfume that drifts across the dark" it was debatable whether the family, and especially Ruthy, could conscientiously rise. The family — and Ruthy — had seen the girl for too many years in Sunday morning dishabille.

And now here was this literary yokel pouring out his bucolic soul to that elder sister in a manner that promptly convinced Ruthy that something ailed his head. "I always thought he was crazy," she commented, when the last flaming missive was finished. "This bunch of letters proves it. What does he need to write 'em for, anyhow — when he's right there in her office and seeing her every day?" What, indeed?

She debated whether she should tell her mother. Considering how she had come by the letters and the way she had violated their privacy, she decided she should not tell her

mother. But she sat gray-faced for a time and confronted the "worst." And the worst to Ruthy resolved into this: Beyond the slightest fraction of a doubt and with sickening speed, the time was approaching when that awful sap would become an intimate member of the Parker family circle. It wasn't down in so many words. Ruthy had searched feverishly for signs of a proposal. Still, young men did not call young ladies mountain stars and golden princesses and all that sort of tosh unless they had a motive —

"Will he, though? I see him!" she vowed. And her small soul boiled in revolt. Had David written the letters to *her*, all might have been different. But the letters were not written to her. They were meant, privately, intimately, exclusively, for the older sister. And Ruthy flamed.

How could she halt this unspeakable tragedy? How could Allie be saved from her folly? Her plan did not come at once. It did not spring fully grown and clothed, like Minerva, from her own small forehead. It came gradually — by degrees.

Once she had heard of a small boy finding his mother's love letters and "playing postman" by distributing them through the neighborhood. That anecdote was the *pièce de résistance* of Ruthy's ultimate expedient now.

She decided she could not run the risk of going through the immediate district, leaving letters at the doors of local domiciles. She might be caught and questioned. Besides, what was the Adams Street neighborhood, that it should be so favored?

No, Ruthy's plan was vaster, craftier, more deadly in conception. *She would use the mails.* And those to whom she sent them. . . !

She finally crept downstairs. She barricaded herself in the side sitting room, at her mother's writing desk. There were envelopes and stamps in the desk. For a full half-hour she chewed a penholder with envelopes and ink before her and carefully thought out the most vicious list of local celebrities among whom the letters might make pleasant reading. Men or women, it made no difference.

She started in with Judge Farmer of the Paris County Bar and ended with old Wilbur Nieson. She included Jim Thorne and Uncle Joe Fodder. Mrs. Parker Turner, the soprano soloist whose husband ran the gas works, got two.

Mrs. Marcus Busby, head of the Fortnightly Literary Club, was favored equally with little Miss Angelina Lasher, the old maid school teacher, whose heart had been buried with Jack Sheldon back in '98 at Chickamauga. There were seventeen letters and sixteen of the most prominent people up and down the valley had their addresses scratched on her mother's envelopes in Ruthy's big round penmanship. Then she licked the stamps and she pounded them — each stamp like a blow in David's eye.

Ten minutes later she mailed them. She mailed them in the corner box at Adams and Pearl streets and clanked down the heavy iron shutter with an air of good work well accomplished.

Not until she had returned to her room, locked her door and pivoted on her heels in glee, did it suddenly occur to her what she had done — *Not to David but to Alice!*

"Heavens and earth! Allie'll be a bigger laughin' stock than the Pill — for lettin' him write her that mush at all!"

Ruthy went suddenly cold all over. She wondered if she could retrieve the letters from the mail-box with string and a hair-pin — or a stick and some chewing gum. She had the chewing gum.

But the deed was done. **It could not be undone.** She threw herself on the bed and she wept.

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CHAPTER XII

THAT GOLDEN CALAMITY

"What the devil ails young Haskell?" Sam Hod demanded later that summer. "When we first took him on and the circulation started up, I thought he had the makin's of a first-rate newspaperman. Now he's gone flaccid all of a sudden. Is he sick or somethin'?"

"Sure he's sick," I answered. "Sicker than he'll ever be again in his life. He's in love, you poor fish! Head in the stars and feet in the gutter."

"In love with whom?"

"Allie!"

"The devil he is!"

"Ask the office. Every one seems to know it but you."

"But Allie's older than him!"

"Only a couple of years."

"And ten times as wise!"

"Maybe that's why she's bagged him."

"How do you *know* he loves her?"

"I met them out near the Catholic Cemetery last night and he didn't have his arm around her as if he exactly hated her."

"Bill, such a thing must be stopped. Supposin' — he took it into his poor, addled young pate to marry her? It'd ruin his life."

"Can you convince a lovesick kid of that — at twenty-one?"

"Yes, by heck! I can and I will."

"You'll only make it worse."

"But, my God, Bill! — Allie herself ought to have more sense."

"That's exactly the trouble, Sam. She wants him and she's going to get him. I heard her say so. Jessie Plumber was in the office a couple of days ago. They didn't know I was in the side room. 'I see you're running around with that kid reporter,' Jessie said. And Allie answered, 'I guess

I know a good thing when I see it.' They went on discussing him as if he was a dress or a hat. Jess finally came out flat and asked Allie if she intended to let it get serious. 'Serious!' cried Allie. 'He'd go ten miles up the Amazon River and turn to the left if I asked him — right this minute.'"

"Did they mention — matrimony?"

"They did! Jessie said something about it and Allie answered, 'Well, it's about time some one put some new life in our family. Ma's suffered long enough.'"

"Suffered?" cried Sam. "You mean Hank Parker's wife? How's she suffered particularly?"

"Being Hank's wife, I suppose. He's always got along from hand to mouth and never did know where he stood."

David was in love, far deeper than either of us dreamed. Never was there a summer like that second summer in Paris. Never were days so short, afternoons so golden, stars so high. The countryside about Paris was pastoral Elysium through which he wandered as in enchantment.

Days of work were never days of labor — only the delirious pleasure of being in contact with the girl who had altered all his world. Came long golden hours of summer afternoons when we put the paper to bed and the two were free to go for the day. Through country by-lanes they wandered, the stone walls ragged with sumach and briar-bloom. Off into hazy distances where meadow growth ran riot, where slender white birches shivered and whispered, where forests were cool and silent or where mossy brown brooks tumbled around hoary old stones — the boy was having his poor, pitiful little fling at paradise.

For he loved this girl, loved her as only twenty-one may love. His artistic imagery painted her with all the high lights, all the virtues, all the thousand and one little foibles and graces that made her the reigning princess of his adolescence. He hovered about her desk in the mornings till I had to drive him brutally to the street for his items. He walked with her as far as the Prospect Street corner — at noon and at sunset. In the evening he was always with her. He took her to picture shows and spent his money for livery rigs. Small wonder they didn't tire of each other long before that summer was finished. Countless love affairs we have seen unfold in the dusty old *Telegraph* office, some holy,

some ludicrous, some tawdry, some pathetic. David's was neither and yet it was all.

I don't say Allie didn't love the boy in turn. Men loved him, why shouldn't women, why shouldn't the daughter of the line of Parker? But there was something *deliberate* on Allie's part throughout it all; it lacked the sweet spontaneity that gives a young girl's love its charm. I spoke to her about it once in a joking way, while Dave was out on the "street." "You mind your own business," was the answer she made — and none too sweet in the making.

"But Allie, do you think you're fair to the boy?"

"Fair to him?"

"He hasn't really had a chance. He found you working here. You appealed to him because of his shyness — he can talk to you without embarrassment. But life, the world, women — some day he'll discover them, Allie. I even wonder if you're even fair to yourself?"

"I guess I love him enough or I'd never put up with his greenness. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Why are you doing it, Allie?"

"Because he's got ambition. He's got ability. He'll go a long way — and I'll go with him. I always said I'd never marry a man that didn't have ambition. I swore I'd never go through with what poor Maw had to put up with."

"What about Romance, Allie?"

"Bosh! He's having it now, isn't he? Don't be an old croaker!"

"No. He's only having a first infatuation — his first heart freedom without parental repression. That isn't Romance."

"I guess young folks would get along all right if older people would keep their hands off."

"Aren't you a little bit sordid about it, Allie?"

"I think you're insulting," she flamed.

"A boy who's had to be a man before his time will be a boy after he becomes a man," I argued. "There's a certain amount of youth that's got to have its day."

"I understand David and the rest of you don't. He knows it."

"A boy in love knows next to nothing — except he's in love."

"Fiddlesticks!"

That was the morning that Judge Amos Farmer, over in his pretentious law office, tore open a plain envelope addressed in a round, open girlish hand and pulled out a bulky epistle. Frowning, the old man adjusted his ponderous spectacles, shooed a bothersome fly from his glistening head and applied himself to its contents. Its opening salutation struck him like a rock:

"Dear Heart Pirate," it began. "All the evening I've been thinking of you, your eyes, your hair, your smile, your pearly teeth ——"

The Judge gasped and made a quick clutch for the envelope. "*What the hell!*" he demanded, dumfounded. The old jurist was sensitive about his hair and teeth — or lack of them. And to be addressed as a Heart Pirate! "Am I crazy? Or am I the butt of a practical joke?" He went on reading:

". . . the vision of your figure is ever in my senses. That faint, elusive perfume about you haunts me in dreams ——"

"Hot damn!" the Judge snorted — and he ripped the bally-rot to shreds lest it be seen by his office stenographer.

In another case, however, the writer was not so fortunate. About half-past one David was busy at his typewriter when the 'phone bell blared. Came a man's voice over the wire:

"Do I understand there's a David Haskell works in that office?"

"He does," I responded.

"Is he there?"

"He is!"

"*Ah!*" It sounded like the Giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk" beholding the diminutive hero. "Put him on the wire!" I thought I recognized the voice of Parker Turner.

The boy left his work, preoccupied. His preoccupation exploded like a puff of chaff at the sounds conveyed to his ear.

"Are you David Haskell?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you mean by writing love letters to my wife?"

"Writin' *what*?"

"You heard me! LOVE LETTERS!" I could discern the sizzling words across the office.

"I haven't — written ——"

"Don't lie to me! I've got the evidence of my senses right in my hands."

"You've got a letter — to your wife ——"

"You bet I have! *Signed with your name!*"

The boy was turning a delicate green. "I never wrote to your wife in my life. I don't even know your wife ——"

"If I had you within reaching distance right now I'd ——"

"Yes, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"What's that? Add impertinence to your insults, do you? Well, you can expect me down inside of ten minutes. And I'm going to horsewhip you within an inch of your fresh young life." The wire clicked dead.

"What's the matter?" I demanded.

"A man's comin' here to fix me with a horsewhip. He says — I been writin' letters to his wife."

"Well, have you?"

"Not unless I did it in my sleep."

"Where you going?"

"I'm going' to get out while the gettin's good!"

I couldn't stop him. He vanished. I believe in his position I would have vanished myself. Sam Hod came in as David streaked through the rear composing room. He was with me when Parker Turner stomped in a few minutes later. The man was purple.

It was Dave's handwriting, sure enough. I had inspiration. I took the missive and went out to Allie. "Did you ever see this letter?" I demanded.

She looked and flushed. "Why — yes. It's a letter Dave wrote me only last week."

"Then how did Mrs. Parker Turner get it?"

"Mrs. Parker Turner? — She didn't."

"She did!"

Allie used the only expletive I ever heard her use in our office. "My God!" she cried wildly. She, too, had an inspiration.

She clutched the letter from my hand and streaked from the premises. Bareheaded she fled up Main Street, leaving proofs to be read for the afternoon's paper.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR THIS HAVE WE DAUGHTERS

There was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth in the Parker homestead that night and a time of trouble such as never had been since there was a nation. The loudest weeper, wailer and tooth-gnasher was naturally Miss Ruth Francis Parker, for certain unpleasant things had transpired on the anatomy of Miss Ruth Francis Parker that evening which had in no wise occurred since she had been a gawky girl in violent pigtails.

Allie, however, was no less distressed — though it was mental instead of physical. "I'll never be able to lift up my head in this town again!" she wailed. "I'll be the laughing stock of the valley for years."

The premise for this supposition was excellent. By the strange, elusive channels a small town possesses for disseminating such pleasantries, most of Paris knew at once what had happened. The male element chuckled over it in cigar stores and barber shops. Girls and women squealed their amusement on their way to the movies. But David — oh, where was David?

It was five minutes to eight o'clock and the anxious Allie had dried her tears sufficiently to begin the ironing of a white linen tablecloth, when a great clump and clatter sounded on the back veranda where someone had sprawled over Willie's bicycle. With heart in her throat she opened the door. David was restuffing a lot of spilled clothes and neckties back in a suitcase at the foot of the steps. The instant the lamplight fell on his features, Allie uttered a little shriek of alarm. "Davie!" she exclaimed. "You're ill!"

He came in without answering, a dubious candidate to function as the lifelong consort of Mrs. Henry Parker's most cherished domestic asset. His face was drawn; it was pale and smudged with tears. He had previously packed the suitcase in a sort of mental hysteria. The mishap at the foot of the steps had heightened this hysteria to frenzy. The suitcase trailed ties and the sleeve of a union suit.

Immediately that Allie bespoke her alarm, came an abrupt cessation of eating in the adjacent dining room where Mrs. Parker, Hank and Willie were partaking of belated evening sustenance. Little Hank halted a generous portion of cocoa-nut pie on its way to his wasted gums; Willie leaped up and splashed coffee on the tablecloth.

"Monmmer!" summoned Allie, after a moment's dramatic consultation. "Come out here a minute, Mommer. And the rest of you stay right where you are!"

Mrs. Parker moved into the kitchen and closed the door. She was back sooner than the household males expected.

"Henry," she announced, "— Mr. Haskell says there's a man loose in this town who's gonna kill him for what Ruthy done. He ain't quite himself. He's got a suitcase full of his things and he's come over to bid Allie good-by before he catches the ten o'clock train."

"Where's he goin'?" demanded the merchant.

"I don't think he knows. He's gotta stay here to-night, Henry. He's all crazied up and not exactly responsible. When he cools off by mornin', maybe he'll feel different, especially if you go see who the man is who's gonna kill him on sight."

"You want me to go right now? Suppose he killed me instead?"

"Get out for the evenin' and stay out till midnight. Leave Allie handle him. I'll go over for a time to Mrs. Merriam's. Willie, you get the clothes off you and streak for bed. This house has gotta get deserted quick — so them two young 'uns can settle their futures."

Immediately arose protest via Master Willie's adenoids. Go off to bed at eight o'clock simply because Allie's "feller" was in some kind of fuss? He vocalized his disapproval in a drawling whine that brought the prompt chastisement his mother threatened. Thereupon Willie agreed to likewise hate Allie's husband down all his days — until it suddenly occurred to Willie that if the two subsequently remained in the kitchen he could open the hot-air register in the ceiling and have a wonderful lying-down place to listen in on the evening's denouement.

Little Hank had his hat and coat handed to him through a narrow aperture in the kitchen door as though David were out there in dishabille. He left for "down street" without

even bothering to ascertain from the lad the identity of the avenging male hunting him in the highways to make him a corpse. Mrs. Parker collected the soiled supper dishes in one great pile, gathered up the remnants of food mechanically, found a shawl and hurried across to her neighbor's.

Food was the last thing David desired. With the doors all closed, the lower rooms emptied of the family, the shades drawn carefully, he sank on the battered sofa and buried his face in his hands. In his misery he shut out the world and tried to reconstruct his future. Allie pulled over a big walnut rocker. Sitting before him, she leaned forward sympathetically and laid her hands on his knees.

"I'm sorry, Davie," she choked. "But remember, we're in it together."

"I know," he said. Yet he groaned.

"Paw banged the life out o' Ruthy. She won't sit down for a week!"

"He'd oughta cut her throat!"

"They'd hang him for that. But Ruth deserves it."

"I'm a ruined man," wailed David. "Think of it! All over this town — prominent people readin' what I wrote only for you in private."

The girl was close to tears herself. "I know it, Davie. I'd do anything on earth to fix it. I ought to tore the letters up. But you know how you like to keep things like that to read in after years. Under my mattress seemed as good a place as any."

"You ought not to have such a sister. I knew she was a sneaky little pest from the first minute I ever set eyes on her!"

Allie straightened slightly. "You n-n-needn't rub it in," she retorted.

"But how can I ever write humor in this town again? I been made a darned sight bigger joke than ever I'll report for the paper. Allie, whatter we ever gonna do?"

"Face it out somehow, I suppose. Paw's already gone to see Mr. Turner and take the blame on himself."

"But he didn't write the letters. I wrote 'em. *Me!* I gotta get out of this place."

"No, no, Davie. You mustn't run away. You'd be a coward."

"B-B-But — you could — come away — with me, Allie!"
"*What?*"

The girl turned feverishly hot and icy cold. Dave lapsed into dramatic silence, his face averted. He waited. Exactly what he waited for, she supplied by her next move — which could scarcely be avoided.

The girl slipped from the rocker and sat on the sofa edge beside him. There her arm found its way about his shoulders. The next moment his swimming head was drawn down to the soft pillow of her chest where he heard the steady but accelerated beating of her heart.

"Oh, Allie!" he gasped. As she imprinted a kiss on his hair, he clutched her. Willie at the open register directly above their heads nearly skinned his nose in the intensity of beholding all that transpired.

Side by side they sat together on that faithful couch, clasped in one another's arms. Never had the daughter of Little Hank Parker seemed more wonderful to the distraught youngster than at that moment. Wisps of her reddish gold hair brushed his cheek and throat. She became, in that moment, an ecstatic epitome of all the ministering womanhood on earth.

"Oh, Allie!" he whispered again raggedly.

In moments such as these — moments which come but once in a lifetime because they come in youth — a word, a syllable, a spoken name, perchance but the glance of an eye, may contain more romance, more feeling, more subtlety, than in all the fiction on the library shelves of a world.

As the time ticked away and they remained so, their intimacy increased. Like a delirious drug they tasted and found it excellent. They were made for each other; they belonged to each other. Down all the eons of human life upon this planet, never had there been two people so expressly fashioned for one another as themselves. Just wherein this was so, neither stopped to analyze. It belonged in realms too deep for logic, a tenet in the kingdom of the emotions. They remarked upon it — or at least David remarked upon it — as though they had stumbled on some vast scientific discovery always suspected but never till this hour proven.

Very tender moments followed. They grew into softer quarter hours. Their whispered intrigue even failed to reach

the eager ears of Master Willie Parker — on his stomach directly overhead.

Allie's position, bending so beside her lover, became increasingly uncomfortable. Under her caressing, however, David's hysteria was subsiding. By the end of the first hour the lad was entirely normal. He was more than normal. What mattered it though a dozen vindictive husbands were rampant on his trail? He was loved by a woman. He was loved terribly by a woman. The hour had disclosed it and the hands of time could never turn back. For her he would do battle. He would even "bust Parker Turner wide open from hell to breakfast" should necessity arise and the man bring any of his spleen for deposit on David's threshold. He said so after a time and was kissed in consequence. Thereat he changed his position on the sofa, stretching his length upon it. The girl sat beside him, bending above, his arm was about her. The world — and women — would never be the same after this evening. A feeling of unescapable seduction possessed him. Hereafter the process of fondling the sex, of being free with general femininity, would be the boresome frippery of a blasé man of the world. Nothing to it! It would be "love 'em and leave 'em," that was it. Dimly in the back of his brain as the second hour drew on, he sensed that having crushed Allie's shoulders so flagrantly and having imprinted so many kisses on her lips, of course he was now under obligations to marry the girl; that is, if he wished to remain a man of honor. He was asking her to marry him. He was asking her now.

The girl's luxurious hair came down and she laughed in frightened abandon at the mischief. With her free hand she felt for dangerous hairpins. She pulled them out. Then roguishly she covered the boy's face and neck with the wealth of her tresses. Her color was hectic. There was vague thought behind her half-closed eyes.

"You're — asking me — to be your wife, Davie?" Yet the question was put so faintly that again Master Willie Parker missed that feature of the evening's entertainment. The great moment of her life, dreamed of through years of fancying girlhood, had come.

A quiver, then a tingling, stirred every nerve and brain-cell in them both. The boy's scalp prickled. The next moment he had a feeling of suffocation. Yet delightful suffo-

cation. He tried to draw a deep breath. He suddenly became chaotic with a happy terror.

"I haven't any right to ask you, Allie. About all I got is three hundred dollars I've saved ——"

"When Maw and Paw was married they only had sixty-one dollars between them."

"Sure, I know. And lots of fellows and girls have nothin' at all." He spoke this as from a vast experience. "But I-I-I-love you, Allie. And I'm lonesome down here in Paris, Allie."

She shook away her loosened hair. With the same unseeing eyes — Mona Lisa eyes now — she examined his shirt front a long minute. Then, with sudden impulse, she crushed his face up against her dimpled neck.

"Davie, dear," she whispered, "—there's nothing in the world I'd like better than to be your wife — especially now when you're in this perfectly ghastly trouble about those letters."

"You m-m-mean, Allie — you *will*?"

"I'll marry you any time and wherever you say!"

So easy as this! — winning one's woman throughout eternity! He glanced down the length of the intriguing old family sofa which had been staid, philosophic witness of so many domestic secrets. He thought of the nights upon nights when he might lie so — on a sofa of his own and be kissed by his wife. How she must love him, to so lightly toss her womanhood away. "I didn't know there was so much happiness in all the world," he declared at last.

Her hand patted the side of his face. She still held him close and he held her. Above stairs Master Willie Parker was overcome with cramp. He altered his position, though whether that alteration had a physical or mental basis, was never made clear.

David below was floating in an ecstasy of bliss that was almost sensual. His wife! What a full-sounding word it was! How much it expressed. Years and years later he would look back to this night on the sofa in the Parker kitchen and bless the packet of letters Ruth had distributed through the town, bless Master Willie Parker who had found them beneath a spring and mattress, bless the Airedale dog who had chased the tiger-cat through a two-dollar-pane

of glass. How strangely things worked out. What little, little things threw Life's great switches —

But boy and girl sat upright suddenly. Down from the ceiling little hard-baked spheres of clay had commenced to plop and bounce with startling elasticity upon the Parker kitchen floor. They were marbles from Master Willie's pockets. There was a shower of them and they spattered in all directions.

Above, Master Willie dived wildly into bed!

It was five minutes to ten o'clock when Mrs. Parker knocked at her own door interrogatively. Evidently the Merriams had desired to retire for the night whether a neighbor's daughter was about to wed eighteen dollars a week or eighteen thousand.

At the knock, the girl leaped up and adjusted her hair into semblance of respectability. She crossed the room and admitted her mother. And the mother, with a nervous glance at the two young faces, sensed that her Alice and the Haskell boy were contracted to run life's handicap together.

An hour later brought Little Hank. He thrust his head in the door warily to get his bearings and entrance cue. His women folk beckoned acquiescence in a sort of "Well, it's all over" fashion as tension breaks in a household with death after weeks of nerve-racking illness. The hymeneal coast being clear, Little Hank's body followed his head. Upon privately being advised by his wife that "Allie had managed it" he was promptly at a loss for etiquette to cover the situation. So he took up a place before the stove where tilting on heels and toes he launched into a pleasant little dissertation on the diminishing profits in the job-lots business since the Jews got into it — the one subject in which he was thoroughly at home.

Mrs. Parker sent him off to bed as being much in the nature of clutter in the romantic situation anyhow, first advising him that Master William Parker was already wooing Morpheus on his conjugal couch and to be careful how he crawled in or he might break a couple of the sleeping boy's ribs. Little Hank opined that no suns would stand still if he did and the lad undoubtedly deserved to have them so stove in on principle. As a parting acknowledgment of the good will he felt toward the youngster on the couch, he

turned at the door and saluted. Thereat he was gone and plans for the wedding went merrily forward.

They went so merrily forward right that night that Dave was taken a trifle aback. It alarmed him, this mechanism of preparation which he had sprung so inadvertently. He had a feeling it might have been waiting such a springing for days, for weeks.

According to Mrs. Parker, she always did say that when her girls were old enough to know their own minds and met the young gentlemen of their choice, the least she could do was "give 'em the proper send-off." Therefore they were to have a little house wedding to which all the Parker relatives were to be invited — and in that later evening hour mother and daughter planned and replanned the day of social glory which was to descend upon the House of Parker as though David were a thousand miles removed and of no consequence whatsoever. Which forsooth he wasn't.

As midnight approached, mother and daughter had most of the details laid, the list of relatives, friends and strangers within the gates decided, what kind of flowers were to trim the rooms and which rooms, what there would "be" for the wedding supper and where Dave and Allie were to "go" for the honeymoon. David wondered at the facility of these preparations and put it down that Allie was a very practical and efficient person and undoubtedly would look after her domicile as competently after they were one.

It was two o'clock before the Parker household completely quieted that night and all inmates but Ruth had forgotten the talk of the town over the mysterious letters. Allie took Dave upstairs and showed him his room, Mrs. Parker following with arms filled with blankets. When the good woman reached the upper landing she came upon her daughter shamelessly locked in her lover's arms. She did not appear to notice. They had a right to do it, of course, being now engaged.

But when a closed door intervened between mother and the amorous pair and Mrs. Parker realized her oldest girl was about to fly the nest at last, she dumped the bed clothing down and cried softly into a feathery bolster.

CHAPTER XIV

ORANGE BLOSSOMS AND WEAK KNEES

We have, in this very addled state of society on this very addled old planet, an institution allied to matrimony and yet apart from it, which keeps many a connubial alliance from skidding into the ditch. It is the inevitable dowry of every female who has been married or given in marriage, to wit: the process of "Learning the Relatives."

Eliminate the lady's relatives and you sever a tie which binds male and female flesh beyond much twisting and straining. The first time it is a novelty. The second time it becomes a nuisance—a conscience-searing nuisance. Sooner or later the mental price is too great—in the exact ratio of our years after thirty. And while some of us may relish the taste of bitter almonds to be picked along the primrose pathway, in the main we generally concede the Lord knew what He was about when he furnished relatives as conjugal ballast, think twice before throwing discretion to heaven's four winds and by the proxy of it being too much trouble, keep out of newspaper headlines.

This being David's first marital venture, however, in the days which now ensued, he played at the great indoor game of Learning the Relatives. With the aid of the family Bible, a red plush autograph album in the Parker front parlor and the charming elasticity of the elder Parkers' memories, he explored the roots, trunk, branches and twigs of the bride's family tree and ate of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil as is proper for a man but once in a lifetime.

He was introduced to the photographic likenesses of various uncles at the age of eight and he met the portraits of various aunts snapped two years after matrimony. He learned of cousins who had perished early of strange and grievous complaints and bunches of nephews and nieces who had distinguished themselves for abnormal brains or no brains at all—most of the male contingent having been photographed in multifarious whiskers or derby bowlers held stiffly in the crooks of left arms and the female portion

strong on frills, furbelows, bangs and a rigidity of posture which inferred they might possess iron implements up their vertebrae commonly used at one period to cram down the powder and ball in muskets.

He learned all about Grandpa Parker who had been heaved into the hereafter on the horns of an infuriated bull and he was regaled on several occasions by the story of Cousin Alec Parker who had gone to the Civil War and vanished and been seen years later sitting in front of a circus in the low Southwest accompanied by an Indian woman and a startling quota of papoose progeny. Comparatively few were the Parkers who had died peacefully in their beds and only one—Great-Grandmother Parker—had reached the age of ninety. Even she had required putting forcibly out of existence, being knocked in the head at last with an ax—a crazed farmhand deciding her days had been long enough in the land after a postprandial argument about an underdone roast. For which he was hung by the neck until he was dead.

On the Babcock side of the house—that is, on Allie's mother's—the kineology was less spectacular. Grandpa Babcock had been a Methodist minister and there was a cousin who had gone to the South Seas as missionary and ended as fond memory and boiled ham. Uncle Moses had been a brig captain during the Civil War and run the Confederate blockade; he had gotten religion afterward and gone into the livery business over to Harvey's Mills. There was a Babcock cousin who had gone west and another who had gone south. Hosts of Babcocks had gone up and a few were specifically known to have gone down—deep, deep down, from which there was no coming up throughout eternity.

But they all had to be learned and catalogued and memorized; and when it was over David was overwhelmed by the announcement that there were still slathers of further relatives not pictorially represented in the domestic art gallery but whom he would meet at the wedding and to whom he must be properly solicitous or suffer spiritually, financially and domestically through all succeeding years.

So amid fuss and preparation and nerve-racking tension generally, the all too brief days flew by and it was September first before we were hardly aware. Thereupon the date for

the Golden Calamity was at hand and David's work at the office suffered.

And while plans and preparations were going hectically forward in The Jig-Saw House on Adams Street hill and we older heads were lamenting in the office, old Zach Haskell walked into the office and Sam promptly took him to task.

"What's the big idea, lettin' David tie a noose around his neck and hang himself at twenty-one?" he roared at big Zach before the man was wholly inside the premises.

Old Zach stood on a corner of the worn linoleum, shuffling his tremendous feet uneasily and looking from face to face as though one of us might assault him.

"Marryin' a nice girl, ain't he?" the father defended. "And he's old enough to get married — reached his majority."

"He's got a brilliant future ahead of him as a newspaper man. Why, that kid might eventually become a nationally famous humorist."

"Good wife won't stop him, will she?"

"But they'll have babies ——"

"Like a few grandchildren myself. Besides, they'll hold him down — make a man of him."

"But why this necessity for making a man before his time? Isn't boyhood pitifully short enough that he must know care and expense and the distractions of a family before he's been twenty miles from the town where he was born."

"Davie's been to Boston."

"Dam' Boston! You get my argument!"

"No, I don't," the father said tartly. "Just what are you drivin' at?" Old Zach shuffled across on fallen arches and sat down. He took off the rough felt hat and turned it about and around in his fingers. Frequently he looked up at us without speaking. He was trying to figure out this verbal onslaught. "But *ain't* she a nice girl? Dave says she was."

"Nice or not nice, that's got nothing to do with it. He needs a knowledge of the world and life ——"

"I brung up that boy pretty straight and stiff. What's the use of him going out and cuttin' up monkey shines?"

"You mean to say you don't think he'll cut them up later, when he finds out what he's done?"

"No, sir, he won't. Because I sha'n't let him."

"You won't cut any figure."

"Reckon I will. I'm goin' to give up the farm and live with 'em."

Silence ensued. A general interchange of glances.

"We're goin' to buy the Garfield property up on Pine Street. The boy come to see me about it and I said I'd loan him the money."

"What Garfield property? You mean 'The Ark'?"

"Never heard it called so. I mean the big red house opposite the cemetery."

"Garfield's 'Ark.' That's it! House don't heat in the winter. Four families live there a season — and move. I've heard it's haunted."

"I can tend furnace and make the house heat. As for ghosts — if there's any there, I'd like to study 'em."

Outside the newspaper office, however, Dave's approaching wedding wore a different aspect. Days before the event, tables and chairs and bulky furniture began to be missing from their accustomed places in The Jig-Saw House and find their way into back rooms and closets. Here Little Hank sprawled over them in the dark and thanked the good Lord that a daughter could be married from beneath the parental roof but once. The furnishings of the house being thus simplified, the trimming of the rooms began.

Plants and potted palms from all over the village were borrowed, begged, bought or stolen and Mrs. Foster Bowen loaned three of her most promising rubber trees. Florists had orders in days in advance for more petunias and hot-house peonies than they had sold in a year. Ultimately begonias and geraniums seemed growing everywhere, from the top of the piazza refrigerator to old Hank's bed. Invitations were printed in our office and mailed to the four corners of the earth, no quarter of which seemed without its quota of Parker or Babcock relatives. Each of them had "R. S. V. P." in the lower left-hand corner — which Little Hank gave it out as meaning Rush Slathers Valuable Presents, regardless of the inappropriateness of the suggestion.

Pickle dishes began to arrive and crouching lions and gilt clocks and pie forks — the clocks suffering to be wound but once, when their main springs burst with a loud report and the contraptions were consigned to top pantry shelves. There was much Woolworth crockery and some cut glass. There

seemed to be enough salt and pepper shakers to equip every household from the gas works to the coal pocket and back by way of the pumping station. There were cereal sets to start the newly wedded couple off in the morning and candlesticks to light them to bed at night. The usual spinster sent the usual chromo, "Alone At Last," and the usual joker sent the usual nursing bottle and considered he had done something smart. It began to look as though Henry Parker's Jumble Shop had moved to his home and what the careless didn't break before the wedding was laid out on a long table in the side room for inspection of the guests who would parade past and inventory the lay-out as morbid-minded people parade past a coffin and sigh ecstatically over the corpse.

Old Doctor Dodd of the Methodist Church had been selected to tie the knot and little Miss Pease was to play the wedding march on a cottage organ brought over for the occasion from the Merriams' and which had nothing the matter with it "but one bellows busted." The bride was to come down the front stairs "leaning on the arm of her father" — for no bride was ever known to go to the altar without parental assistance if she were any kind of a bride and knew her business. After the ring was on Allie's finger there was to be the customary wedding spread of indigestibles, after which the happy pair were to catch the eight-thirty train for a week in Boston while Mrs. Parker would catch Little Hank and make him assist her in setting up extra beds for out-of-town relatives too poor or too tight to go to hotels.

And so came the fifth of September, 1908, so chosen because it was Allie's birthday. On that date, at six o'clock in the evening — as male relatives who might wish to attend couldn't leave their employment before that hour — the proof-reader in the *Telegraph* office was to marry Mr. David Haskell, the promising young journalist whose specialty was humor in all its branches.

It was the inky-fingered chronicler of this bucolic narrative who was delegated to cover the event itself for the edification of our subscribers and the glory of the House of Parker forever. He can personally vouch for the fact that the arabesque structure bulged with some fearful and wonderful ramifications of family tree boughs and branches and limbs and twigs, even to the fourth generation. And David

had to meet them all. Not one of them had been in the place five minutes before he was dragged forth and presented as Exhibit A — the cause of all this — the *deus ex machina* of matrimony generally.

There was Uncle George who drove an ice wagon and had a wife who couldn't open her mouth without putting her foot in it and saying something that started a wrangle, and Uncle Samuel who ran a lumber business over to Barre with the help of a profane vocabulary that was classical. There was Uncle Micah whose idea of weddings was an occasion at which it was permissible for every one to get intoxicated, and Uncle Hiram who also had a little something on the hip and insisted that Dave borrow that something at frequent intervals to fortify his nerve.

Aunt Annie was the woman with the big nose who wanted to kiss him and welcome him again and again into the family, and Aunt Abbie was the woman with the knotted cane and the broken heart who kept advising him about the terrific mistake he was making and suggesting the boy back out before it was too late. Aunt Hattie called him aside and catechized him about his taste for "licker" almost before Uncles Micah and Hiram had given him up as lacking the true rudiments of manhood. And Aunt Hope had made seven references to "her money" before she had been in the place twenty minutes and greeted Dave skeptically as a future beneficiary.

Relatives smoked on the rear piazza and relatives lined up against the walls like a houseful of animated waxworks. Relatives were discovered down in the cellar clandestinely sampling Little Hank's porter and relatives were apprehended in the attic quarreling over ancestral heirlooms. Relatives, especially young relatives, turned up in the pantry, in the closets, behind portières, on the stairs. But in the main they were simple, average, good-hearted Vermont folk who had come to see the marriage of Hank's eldest girl and accepted it as an occasion to renew ragged acquaintanceships and put the best foot forward.

At 4:45 Willie had turned the last freezer of cream — with the help of four neighborhood boys — Little Hank had locked the store, arrived home, been captured and forced into an upstairs room to garb himself as a glass of fashion and mold of form. Chairs had been provided for at least three quarters

of the guests and the remaining quarter had assured the presiding dignitaries "they just as soon stand as not." They were the standing kind on principle, I thought. At 5:30 the guests were met, the feast was set, Allie was above stairs with her mother in a fine flutter, Ruth was trying to act superior down in the front parlor watched by some feminine contemporaries from Hebron, Master Willie was keeping relatives of his own age from climbing the wagon-house roof, and all that was needed to start the merry din was the arrival of old Doctor Dodd.

An electric thrill passed through the house at five minutes to six when word went around that the minister had arrived and was then "out front." Like a convict in the death house, about to be led to execution, Dave was called from the back kitchen, pushed through the crowd and joined by his best man, a compositor named Crawford from the *Telegraph* office who likewise had boarded with the Widow Brooks.

The minister entered, was relieved of his wraps and introduced to every one in the front hall and parlor. Miss Pease tinkered nervously with the "busted" organ. There was a general surge of humanity toward the front room and doorways. The clock on the dining room mantel struck six. Miss Pease got her cue to see what she could do with "Lohengrin" and that fragile bellows. The little organ arose to the occasion and did its best. The opening strains piped through The Jig-Saw House.

The wedding was on!

A loud hiss from the upper hallway recalled Little Hank who had started down the front stairs with nothing on his arm in the shape of a daughter. The error was remedied. Descending the steep flight came Henry Parker with the frilled and white-veiled daughter who was going from his roof forever while the strains of the music continued, rising and falling, bringing a lump in the throat and a mellowness in the heart, wherever there is marriage and giving in marriage, wherever there is noble intent and homely endeavor, womanly affection, human attributes that are sweet and gentle and sincere and true.

The music finally died away. The crowd closed after the father and daughter, pressing uncomfortably close. Silence followed — like which there is no other in life. After a

moment in which Doctor Dodd found the appropriate place in his ritual, the old man cleared his throat —

"In the name of God, Amen!"

Again he cleared his throat and glanced about at the faces. It was so quiet that the ticking of the little clock on the dining-room mantel could be heard distinctly. A woman reaches the zenith of her beauty in her wedding veil. The Parkers gazed in awe upon the daughter of their bosoms. Her rich girlish blood throbbed beneath her delicate complexion; her hazel eyes were downcast; her reddish-gold tresses contrasted strangely with the armful of orange blossoms David had procured from Springfield. She was the prettiest girl in Paris at the moment, even as Dave was the most insufferable male.

Yet nobody paid him particular attention. The relatives and friends saw only a white-faced boy with slightly bowed shoulders, wavy black hair, hands that were always chapped, enormous ankles — like his father's. A new black suit fitted him poorly; its collar was jerked away from his neck as though he were subsequently to be hung and the coat was already prepared for the halter. A long white thread showed on his right coat sleeve which thirty women were shrieking inwardly to remove before he had been with his bride ten seconds; one of his pant legs caught in his shoe top and stayed there rakishly.

"We are met, dear friends," Doctor Dodd's benevolent voice was droning, "— to join this man and this woman in the holy bonds of matrimony ——" and so on through the service with the fateful pauses for assents to his questions. It was a beautiful prayer he prayed in the end. Several women were sobbing audibly before it was finished and most of the men were dying to get out in the side yard and smoke.

When the prayer was ended, Dave printed a kiss on the kissable lips of his wife. Little Miss Pease played the balance of the wedding march with no one to march to it and nowhere for them to march if there had been. And immediately it was done, the social bedlam started with a blast.

Mrs. Parker dried her motherly tears to assume charge of the refreshments which nearly every one had sampled in some form when they considered no one looking; Little Hank withdrew to the stairs, to wonder what part he played in this pow-wow *now* and ask himself anxiously if they'd remember that in the matter of ice cream he liked the kind with nuts

in it and to paraphrase an old saw, was "forgotten but not gone."

The wedding supper was mostly grab. Some one stepped on Allie's veil the second time she turned around and split it to her neck. Ruth had tried being "nice" to her multitudinous cousins until her patience was ragged, when she had boxed a couple of ears, been clouted in turn and ordered upstairs. Willie cared nothing for weddings on principle and by the time the ceremony was ended had given up trying to bring down the youthful relatives from the wagon-house and joined them himself where the dozen of them started jigging and ragging — and worked rents in the tin that took a plumber a week in the mending. One boy fell off and sprained his wrist and an adolescent relative smoked on the steps of the tool house and nearly fired the structure with a cigarette.

To David, however, the balance of that afternoon was mostly blur. Relatives pushed and prodded and turned him. Relatives walked on his feet and the jovial element ruffled his hair. One young buck untied his tie and he broke the buttonhole of his collar getting it fixed in place. He felt like a vagrant who has pushed an innocent looking plunger and gotten an explosion which has rocked a town. From first to last, Allie paid him not the slightest attention. He might have been Willie for all the Parker womenfolk minded him that sunset. And yet around seven o'clock he was mindful of a whacking on the back and a paper held before his eyes.

"You poor boob!" cried some one male on whom he had never set eyes in his life. "Do you know what Uncle Hank's give you for a wedding present?"

"Naw," said Dave dully. "What?"

"The deed to his store! He's made you a present of his business!"

Allie overheard and came up. "What's that?" she demanded.

The document was duly exhibited.

"My stars!" she cried blankly. "Ain't you just about stunned, David?"

"Y - Y - Yes," the boy admitted. He was. Dumfounded.

"Now," snapped Allie, "maybe there'll be some order in the dusty old dump at last!"

The turmoil continued —

PART TWO
THE PEOPLE PEOPLE MARRY

CHAPTER I

RECENTLY WEDDED

Uncle Joe Fodder often declared, "If you happen to see three wrinkles o' neck-fat goin' down Main Street, you can bet five dollars Jim Thorne's in front of 'em." It wasn't on Main Street I saw the well-known neck wrinkles the evening of Dave's marriage, however. It was on Prospect Avenue. With short, chubby arms clasped behind his back, Jim strolled in the cool of that September evening and smoked a fragrant Havana. We walked to the business section together.

"Well," I sighed finally, "I've just covered an event at which angels might weep."

"Yeah! I know — young Haskell's marriage."

"The happy event is a thing of the past. And Hank's made him a present of the store!"

Jim stopped short. His mouth opened, his cigar tilted on his thick lower lip and then dropped out. On the sidewalk at his feet it exploded in a little burst of dull red sparks.

"The devil he has!"

"I saw the bill of transfer."

Jim recovered from his stupefaction. He used his huge shoe-toe to kick the lost cigar stub into the edge of Deacon Fleming's lawn, lighted a fresh one and got again in motion. But over and over, as he paced beside me, he kept muttering, "My Lord! My Lord! How could Hank do it?"

"Naturally he expects the boy will run it, I suppose."

"But Hank's up to his neck and ears in debt. I ought to know. He's into our bank for six thousand dollars. What's the idea o' passin' the buck to that eager-faced kid?"

"Maybe he's got the idea the kid will pull him out."

The fat man swore again to conceal his hurt. "I'd do a lot for that kid if he'd let me — say, what the devil's all this racket I been hearin' the last few minutes?"

I likewise had heard strange noises, momentarily growing louder. They seemed to come down Prospect Street behind us. We went to the edge of the curbing and waited.

A crowd of people was streaming down the grade in the far, darkened distance — mostly in the center of the street. Arc lamp by arc lamp we saw them illumined. They seemed milling about a conveyance — several conveyances — dragged by those in the vanguard.

There were fifty to a hundred of these people and the din grew louder. All the pots, pans, kettles and boilers in the universe, it seemed, were being dragged on a hundred ropes across the corrugations of the crosswalks. Men were hooting, girls were squealing, windows were going up in adjacent houses. And down into the business district this mêlée was advancing — intermittently punctuated by the crash of breaking glass.

Hatless and coatless, most of that herd was composed of young bucks of the town. In the center of that human bumbling, bizarre in the autumn darkness, was an automobile of ancient vintage pulling an equally antiquated buggy. Jim and I recognized that vehicle. Through twenty years Hank Parker had driven it about the countryside until a passing business depression compelled him to sell his horse.

But as the milling mass worked toward us, engulfed us, passed under the arc lamp by which we had paused, we recognized something else. We recognized the victims of this super-hilarity. I caught sight of a disheveled, battered, frenzied youth half standing in the ancient vehicle and seeking with his coat to ward off intermittent missiles aimed at himself and his companion.

And never was a buggy trimmed as that buggy was trimmed. Strips of sheeting and "Just Married" signs — many of them disgustingly lewd — were hung on the shafts or twined in the wheels. Hay and straw, old clothes and ropes gave it a tattered, ludicrous aspect. From the rear axle were more ropes, more signs, more streamers. And the ropes dragged the most alarming assortment of old iron and tinware that was ever salvaged from a public dump. The racket grew deafening. Boys beat tin pans, a score had blaring horns. The klaxon on the ancient auto made almost as much noise as the engine itself.

The journalist who knew humor in all its branches was

the victim of this conspiracy; I saw Ned Farrell, Chick Jennings and the Rafferty fellow in the "hay-baler" auto. Jim contended later he had even seen Parker Turner rocking the dilapidated buggy so that Dave and Allie could scarcely keep their places. Escape they could not. They were being started on their honeymooning with proper small-town ceremony. For months the boy had speared these people in his journalistic contributions. Though they had been compelled to laugh in those times with their neighbors, deep inside they had harbored resentment. This was the night of reckoning. And what a night!

"My God!" bellowed Jim with the tumult at its height. "They're bein' wrecked!"

The two had lost their hats. Dave's necktie had come untied. Allie's hair was flooding her shoulders. The motley procession passed us, sweeping us onward into its vortex. We tried to fight free and halfway succeeded. Yet we followed partly because we wanted to see what happened and partly because we could not help it.

Into Main Street the pandemonium poured and straight through the business section. I beheld a tomato strike Jim's white shirt front where it broke like a burst of blood. People came running from stores and offices. The hardware boomed on the Main Street car tracks. I never knew Paris held so many dogs.

Opposite Chris Philopolous' fruit stand, one of the hoodlums tied a loose rope to one of its props. The stand crashed down as the vehicles moved forward and was likewise towed to the station, oranges rolling in all directions, bananas and pineapples strewn for a block.

The procession had started high on the hill to the west of the village; the railroad station lay on the east. Across an entire town a terrified boy and a sobbing girl were transported, yet by some queer twirk of herd psychology not detained from the eight-thirty train.

At the station another party waited — a more harmless party, yet plentifully equipped with old shoes and confetti. Dave and the girl were helpless in the chaos of sportive humanity that pulled them from the buggy, spilled open their grips, stuffed them together again with much febrile shrieking.

Mercifully the train came in at once. The air was filled

with rice and confetti. A coach window was broken by shoes; one man badly cut by glass. The last car was the Boston Pullman. On it the couple had reservations. That is, they thought they had reservations, but the eighteen-inch strips of tickets were afterward found under the seat of the antiquated buggy.

Nick Cooper, the shoe drummer, gave me full details a fortnight later; he was one of those passengers. In the Pullman, bride and groom had the chance to inventory their mutual wreckage. David's hair resembled the scalp of an Australian bushman, his collar was a soggy rag. On his shirt was a vast red blot as though some one had stabbed him in the chest; his pockets had been rifled. Allie had lost both hat and hairpins and she wore but one oxford.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she wailed. "Everything's ruined!"

David, of similar opinion, endeavored to solace her. People in that sleeper were either cursing or grinning; the porter eyed them dourly.

"Shut up!" snapped Allie at her husband. "Keep off! Don't you dare touch me! It's all your fault! If you hadn't written such things about them in the paper, they'd never have laid in wait for us. Besides, you should have protected me. Any real husband would."

David cringed. This from the dearest girl in the world! On such a night! It stunned him almost as much as the brutal convoy. "But I couldn't help it," he choked.

"I've got my opinion of men who let their wives be assaulted by hoodlums. Look at me!—a mess, and my wedding trip ruined!" Then off she went into a paroxysm of weeping while David smeared blood from his knuckles and felt vainly through his pockets for a handkerchief.

"Am these yo' bags?" demanded the porter, coming up.

David inferred the bags might once have been theirs. So the porter dumped them—almost threw them—down at the feet of bride and groom and returned to his cluttered vestibule. The incident held neither humor nor pity for the overworked Ethiopian. Just because two people must get married was no reason why a whole railroad should be assaulted, his car in the rôle of specific assaultee.

"Ma and I worked so hard to get everything fixed up nice," wailed the heartbroken girl, "and a bunch of Water Street roughnecks spoil it. You better have 'em stop the

train, Dave Haskell. I want to get off and go back to Paris."

David paled. "It's against the law to stop a train. I heard a man say so once."

"I half believe I've married a fool!"

Then it was that David made the sickening discovery that his pockets were empty. His keys were gone, his wallet, his tickets. He even lacked money to send back a wire. He was light-headed, bilious. His wounded hand stung him. He sobbed—a couple of times—then remembered he was now a married man with a woman "leaning" on him and weeping was out of character. Allie was raging:

"Maybe some folks thought it was funny. I think it's a crime!"

"Don't make a disturbance, Allie. You got some other clothes in your bag: go into the ladies' room and put 'em on. I'll have the porter make up the berths while you do it. I'll take the upper one so's you can get a good night's rest."

"As if I could get a good night's rest after that awful mauling! David Haskell, your coat's torn up the back, did you know it?"

David's upper garment *had* felt rather free and easy across the shoulders. He stood up, took it off and surveyed it—ruefully. His thoughts were of his tickets.

"You got a needle and thread, ain't you, Allie?"

"It was sewing your darned clothes headed me into this mess in the first place! How far does this train go before it stops?"

"Rutland, I guess."

"Well, we're getting off at Rutland. And going back."

"Aren't you going with me on any honeymoon, Allie?"

"Looking like somethin' the cat dragged in?"

"B-B-But what'll we do in Rutland?"

"Walk out and lie down in front of the locomotive! I feel like it, anyhow."

"*Tickets, please!*"

David swayed dizzily. Why couldn't they give him time to go through all his luggage and find those damnable tickets? "I'm a bride and groom," he explained thickly. "And this is a wedding trip. And I thought I had the tickets *somewhere!*"

"Were you the pair who made all that fuss back there at Paris?"

"It was our friends did it," explained David dully. "They wanted to give us a send-off."

"I'll say they've given you a send-off! What's that on your chest?"

"I think it's a tomato," groaned the boy. "And Miss Parker's got flour all over her coat——"

"Rather looks as if your loving friends had tried to stock your pantry."

"I been a funny reporter on a paper and some of them didn't like what I wrote about 'em——"

"Well, you're certainly a funny *something* now. What ails your hand?"

"I cut it. And Miss Parker's lost a shoe. They gave us a buggy ride and rough-housed us."

"Who's Miss Parker? Thought you said you were married?"

Allie interjected scathingly: "He *is* married but hasn't sense enough to realize it."

"I should think he'd realize it—by the look of him. Where you two goin'?"

"Boston," said David.

"Back home to Paris as soon as this train stops so we can get off!" contradicted Allie. "If we ever reach Boston like this, they'll think we've been fightin'."

"Well, well, where's your tickets?"

"That's just what I'd like to know," wailed David, trying to go through his pockets, one-handed.

"Haven't got 'em in your luggage, have you?"

"I'll look and see," and the new benedict hoisted his bag and finally opened it.

The valise had been emptied and refilled with pineapples!

"What the hell?" cried the flabbergasted conductor. Allie and David exchanged dumfounded glances. They had planned on no involuntary wedding gifts from Chris Philopulous' wrecked fruit stand.

"Try the other one," gasped Allie.

David tore the second bag open. *It was loaded with bananas!*

"Huh, you ain't goin' to Boston," declared the conductor. "I'd say from your baggage you was headed for Hawaii."

"My clothes! They're gone!" wailed Allie.

The train conductor looked at the Pullman conductor and both of them turned to the chuckling spectators. "You can't ride on this train without tickets," declared the former. "The company shot a man against a wall last week for letting some honeymooners ride without paying, and I've got a wife and family."

Nick Cooper overheard. "Is it Boston you're goin'?" he demanded jovially. "I'll pay your fare if your lovin' friends looted you."

"We're going to Rutland and get an automobile and start straight back home at once," sobbed Allie Haskell *née* Parker. "And if this fool I've married says different, I'll have my father get an annulment to-morrow."

Nick settled their fare and likewise loaned Dave a handkerchief for his injured knuckles. "I don't know how I can repay you for this," stammered the chagrined husband.

"That's all right, bub. We're all victims of practical jokers at times."

"Have a pineapple!" said Dave, half in jest.

It developed, however, that Nick did not consider himself attracted that moment in regard to pineapples. Neither did his appetite just then demand bananas. The happy pair therefore sat down and surveyed their generous assortment of tropical products. "I'd just like to know when they ever switched our clothes for all this stuff?" observed David.

"That's about all the sense you've got. What do I care *when* they switched 'em so long as they did it? You give me an awful ache, David Haskell. You're just what Ruthy called you — a *pill*."

David let the indictment pass. The trip he had planned for days, for weeks, to have ruined like this! And the dearest girl in the world scorching him for being responsible! Brides didn't deport themselves this sharp-tongued way. She should have laid her golden head on his shoulder and allowed him the rôle of manly consoler.

But the train drew into Rutland in a surprisingly short time. They picked up their portable fruit stock and Allie hobbled out to the vestibule. And immediately they were down on the platform the eagle eye of a policeman found them. "What you two been doing to each other?" he demanded incredulously.

"Gettin' married," David gulped.

"I'll say you have! I got half a mind to run you in—for disorderly conduct."

"We haven't been conductin' ourselves disorderly."

"No? I suppose you just sat down, quiet and peaceable, and your clothes flew to pieces that way all over you." Then to Allie, "Where's your shoe?"

"We got married and they rough-housed us. And we want to go back to Paris. David Haskell, if you let me get in jail I'll never speak to you again so long as I live."

The patrolman considered. "What you got in the bags?" "Clothes."

"Then why don't you dress in 'em, instead of descendin' on Rutland in this condition?" A crowd was collecting and the man was nettled.

"We haven't found a place."

"Lemme *see* what you got in those bags!"

"Oh, oh, oh!" wailed Allie.

Numbly the boy suffered the officer to throw back the clasps. The policeman nearly lost his helmet in astonishment.

"How come you're luggin' pineapples and bananas around on a weddin' trip? I think you're a pair of nuts. You come along with me till we get this business straightened out!"

"Oh, oh, oh!" wailed Allie afresh. "Start on a honeymoon and end up in jail!"

Queer how things happen. On his way home to Vermont Avenue near midnight, Jim Thorne saw something white on Deacon Fleming's lawn where hours before he had dropped his cigar. He reached down, picked it up and carried it beneath an arc light.

It was a woman's lacy little nightgown with AP neatly worked in the needlework upon the breast. Through it were likewise drawn many strands of delicate baby ribbon. The garment, however, was soiled and bespotted.

"Dam' queer thing to find on the Deacon's lawn. Wonder how the deuce it got there?"

But the autumn night in the little hill town was fragrantly quiet. Jim had no way of telling, not knowing as yet about the fruit in Allie's suitcase. He stuffed the nighty in his pocket and carried it home to Thorn Hedge.

CHAPTER II

THORNS AND THORNES

Carrie Flynt, after that ride into Paris with David the morning of their initial appearance, had subsequently found herself occupying a position that was pleasantly unique.

A diminutive, determined, very respectable little person, she wanted the world to accept her. And a diminutive, determined, very respectable little person she continued during the six years she remained as Mrs. James Thorne's companion. She possessed one of those intense, vigorous, little-old-lady personalities as loveable as they are piquant. And she "managed" the ailing woman with such application and solicitude that she had become an institution in the household before she had been there a month.

It was this pert capability which had led to Dave's contention that she was "bossy." Certainly she was the last type of femininity to suspect of adolescent sentiment. "Running after boys," a chronic affliction with ninety per cent. of girls of her years, would have been as insufferable and abhorrent to her as poisoning one's parents or drinking whisky in church.

And yet — when such a type becomes enamored of a male in the proper time and place, there is either a golden wedding at the far end of the affair or a self-imposed funeral somewhere along at its very beginning. Or an old maid's rosary all the time between.

Such was the quaint personality who beheld Jim Thorne pause a long time before his residence on that late evening in which David Haskell was married, lean on his own iron gates and regard the place sadly. There was no mistaking his bulk or his shape. The girl in the shadows of the front veranda, her duties ended for the day, had been communing with the mystic autumn moonlight.

Jim had not wanted to go in at once and leave that dreamy fall midnight. The man was troubled, more troubled than he had been for months. He noted as he came up the ave-

nue that the lamp in his wife's room had been extinguished. That made him lonely and the combination caused melancholia.

His thoughts went wandering as he stood there leaning on the low, fancy-iron gates and watching the red half-moon work its way around behind the campanile of the crypt that was his residence. He recalled the cottage in Cross Street where he and Fanny had first set up housekeeping — that happy, far-off year in the tiny house long since obliterated by the pretentious brick structure of the Paris Steam Laundry.

He had not been so ludicrously elephantine in those days. Pleasingly plump, perhaps. But not elephantine. No wrinkles on the back of his neck. No mouth so lost in his ample face that it resembled a button. Fanny had been one of the prettiest girls in the mill. He recalled the birth of their first baby — a little girl that had died. He remembered how he finished his eleven daily hours with "the company," paused on his way home each night to buy the noon paper from Boston and one cigar. After supper he read the paper as he smoked the cigar. The finish of the cigar was the signal for retiring. Weeks and weeks of that. Years and years. And each Saturday noontime he had put five dollars of his wages in Judge Farmer's bank. Such peaceful, uneventful satisfaction he had never known before or since.

He recalled one winter's evening when he sat with Fanny in a darkened kitchen before a homely old stove. Both had their feet on the shelf of its oven door. He remembered how they had talked of the happy, distant day when they might have as much as five thousand dollars.

Five thousand dollars! The weeks had grown into months and the months into years. The laundry had wanted the property; they had sold — at a profit — and moved up on Cedar Street. They had built another house on upper Maple Street and moved again. Five thousand dollars had seemed a mere pittance once they had it in bank.

Well, the years had gone somehow. And brought him what? Business fights and domestic cares. Times of sickness, nights of worry. Bills to be paid, notes to be met. And then steadily, ruthlessly, the realization, as his position grew stronger at the mill, that gradually he was being ostracized from the companionships of other years.

His money was responsible. Then had come the terrible tragedy of his boy's dereliction at the bank. The suicide had prostrated Fanny for weeks. Pernicious anemia had somehow followed that. He loved the little woman for all they had been through together. And, as he glanced back over his life this night there at the gate, a strange analogy arose before the fat man.

He saw again a white-faced lad struggling in a dilapidated old buggy to ward off missiles from the body of a clinging, hysterical girl as the throng bore the two of them helplessly along from out of one darkness into another.

Wasn't that life? Wasn't that matrimony? Didn't that epitomize all of a man's experience with love and the world? In the vehicle of matrimony, the surging currents of humanity forced the married pair onward. The spleenful howled at their heels; the mischievous shrieked on ahead, planning trouble into which to pull them. Life itself had its missiles as well as a small town's hoodlums. And ever the man stood up and faced them as he sought to shield and protect the woman in that same dilemma with him. Yes—the analogy was perfect.

Jim felt a strange heart-tug for David, as he stood outside his Tomb that night and recalled the evening's experience. And Carrie watched him, puzzled, from the depths of the darkened piazza.

He came up after a time. There was nothing else to do.

"Hello!" he cried, startled, as he beheld the girl in shadow. "What *you* doing up so late?"

"Enjoying the night," she answered. "There's mystery in it, isn't there? Not exactly like summer, somehow. It seems speaking—something strange and vague."

"So you feel it, too?"

"I'm thinking a person could hardly help it."

He was glad the girl had not retired. He sat down beside her. The chair creaked alarmingly. He lighted his last cigar for the day.

"You're a queer one, Carrie. Sometimes I think far wiser than me. How's Fanny?"

"She seems to be improving."

"You've done it, Carrie. You've raised her spirits. You and David."

"David?"

"Young Haskell. By the way, he was married to-night. Hank Parker's girl, Alice. Quite a time they had gettin' off. A regular rough-house."

"We heard a disturbance in the direction of Adams and Prospect Street about halfpast seven." The girl tried to speak indifferently.

"That was it. A lot of hoodlums that Dave's been gaffing lately in the paper thought it a chance to get back. Roughed him up pretty badly, I guess. Chief Hogan afterward started arrestin' people in droves. I was almost took up myself." And he related the evening's *diablerie*.

"I met Alice Parker several times when she was keeping company with Jack Hoadley out to the Crossing," Carrie said huskily. "I got the idea that she was — selfish."

"Will they make a go of it?" The millionaire seemed to hang childishly on her answer.

"She must be older than he."

"Couple of years."

"I heard her say once she wouldn't marry until she was twenty-five and only to a man who could get ahead and take her with him. It impressed me as being terribly sordid." And Miss Carrie Flynt clasped her tight little hands together in her lap and stared straight at the tips of her two tiny feet close on the veranda rail.

"I wish I could do something for that boy," declared Jim Thorne miserably. "If I only knew what."

"Perhaps there'll be plenty of opportunities — if he's married as you say."

About three the next morning Jim Thorne was awakened by his wife.

"What is it?" he asked confusedly.

"Listen, Jimmy! Hear that muffled noise? For hours and hours I've laid here hearing it — at least it seems so."

"Huh! Sounds like some one's sobbing."

"I wonder if Carrie's all right?"

"She'd probably let us know if she wasn't."

A moment later he was again asleep.

CHAPTER III

PROSPECTS

It was a bleary-eyed lad who came into the *Telegraph* office the following afternoon.

"Hello!" I cried, astounded. "Thought you were on your honeymoon."

"It's sort o' fizzled. When we come to take stock of ourselves we were too bunged up. Besides, I lost my money and my wife's abed sick."

I stared at him.

"I'm here to hand in my notice. You know Hank Parker's store. I'm gonna run it."

"You mean you're quitting your job on the paper?"

"I've got to, haven't I? Now that he's left me the business."

"But you can't run that business. You're a newspaper man, not a merchant."

"Perhaps. But it wouldn't be polite to refuse him. A man's got to think of his relatives' feelings."

"Not when they impose on him, he needn't."

"But Mr. Parker's not imposing on me. He's real generous. Isn't he givin' me the business he's been all his lifetime buildin'?"

"Have you stopped to consider why he did it?"

"Because he likes me for a son-in-law."

"Do you think he'd have done it if the business had been profitable?"

"It *is* profitable. He's run it for years and managed to raise his family. I figure I can make as high as thirty dollars a week. He averaged fifteen or twenty."

"If he's given you the business and it's profitable, put in some one to run it on a percentage. Keep on with your job at the office. Make money at both."

"I couldn't do that. It wouldn't be polite to Mr. Parker."

"Well, what's he going to do with himself?"

"He says it's time he retired."

"On what? What's he going to live on, himself?"

David looked down at his broken nails and considered. "He's probably got some money saved."

"Hank Parker's never saved a cent in his life. You're a fool to tackle it, David."

"But he's my father-in-law, isn't he — now? I got to think of his feelings. Besides," he brightened perceptibly, "you ought not to kick. I'm gonna do an awful lot of advertisin' in the *Telegraph*."

I put my hands on his shoulders and made him face me. "Don't do it, David," I begged. "Stick to your forte — which is writing — and let these relatives shift for themselves."

He immediately looked horrified. "Shift for themselves? I couldn't do that. It 'd be too selfish."

"A fellow's got to have a certain amount of healthy selfishness in this world or people will climb on his back."

"But he ought to think of his own flesh and blood above everything else — or how can he ever be happy?"

"Who's put that philosophy into your head?"

"Why, nobody. It's just — natural and right. Besides, I'm not afraid. It makes me feel sort of glad I can look after 'em. What's the use of havin' folks if you can't do things for 'em? Not once in a while but all the time?"

I made it my business later that day to go over to Cross Street and visit Hank Parker.

The Jumble Shop was located a few doors from Main. It occupied the southern half of a squat, brick building that had once been a temperance hall. On the tar walk before a foggy show window was a bedlamic assortment of tinware and furniture, new and second-hand. There was little pretense of decorating his window. It was merely so much additional storage for a motley assortment of cheaply bought goods. A couple of sewing machines and some oil cans, some collapsible camp chairs loaded down with cartons of vanilla extract, a crate of old law books half buried under a pile of arctic overshoes of sizes too large or too small for sale — these invited the purchaser to tarry.

The shop within was one long room with shelves on both sides that reached to the ceiling. Across the rear was a pine partition. Behind this partition was Henry's "office" and workshop. He repaired old furniture in this workshop

and, being interrupted in the process by customers, waited on them resentfully.

A center aisle was somehow cleared from the door to the rear. There was likewise spaces behind the counters. But most of the floor space was consumed by furniture—furniture and crates, boxes and tinware. In only two places might the customer deal with the proprietor across a counter. And Henry had to negotiate these places by stepping over or climbing piles of dusty merchandise or rubbish which had tumbled out behind.

Brooms and bedsteads, stuffed animals and picture frames, celluloid collars and cuspidors, glassware, talcum powder, window shades, dolls, chamber sets, garden hose, frying pans, straw hats, corsets and stove polish—all these and more were jumbled together in a sublime *mêlée* of retail confusion. Expressmen and freight trucks brought goods to the address, purchased by Henry on semiannual trips to bargain sales in Boston or Springfield. They were dropped in the floor space and pushed as far as possible out of the way. Crates were torn open and contents exposed. There they continued exposed—on through the years. If purchasers called for their contents, they were accommodated. If not, the contents stayed there. The Jumble Shop was extremely profitable picking for light-fingered gentry from Water Street.

I found the weazened little man with his skullcap over one eye as usual, down in the workroom mending a broken-legged chair with hot glue.

"What you doing here?" I demanded. "Thought you'd handed over this place to David."

He scowled at me, then continued to work at his chair. I sat down on a crate and smoked.

"Well, what if I have? That ain't no reason why I'm gonna step down and out," he finally retorted.

"I wondered just what the arrangement was to be. You can't blame me for having an interest in David."

"He can wait on trade," declared Henry. "I'm sick of it."

"But that's your *business*, waiting on trade. You talk as though the advent of customers was some sort of imposition."

"Folks are awful fools: never know what they want. I'm sick of 'em — lock, stock and barrel."

"And you're going to give David complete charge — let him rehabilitate the business?"

"You mean let him turn things upside down so a body can't find nothin'? I ain't quite that crazy."

"I see. There were strings to your wedding present."

"But he's only a boy; he's gotta be taught business. 'Make haste slowly', says I, 'be sure you're right before goin' ahead.' I been a long time buildin' this business. The boy can work into it gradually till he's learned all the ropes." Henry spoke as though his industrial achievement comprised acres of floor space with branches in Europe and Asia.

"What I'm most interested in knowing is how you and David will split on your finances."

"We ain't come to that yet," said this astute business genius, thrusting his tongue in his cheek as he tightened a glue-brace.

"But doesn't David expect, having been given this enterprise, that it means absolute control to do as he pleases and have what he wishes?"

"If he does, he's got another think comin'."

This was precisely what I had expected. I had never been able to conceive of Little Henry Parker walking out of his Jumble Shop and spending the balance of his days in innocuous desuetude at home.

"Then what kind of a gift have you really made him?"

"I've made him the gift of an opportunity to come into this place and take the nuisance of customers off'n my shoulders. Of course there'll be profits. There allus has been. We'll whack up somehow. It's all in the family."

"But it isn't all in the family. David's starting a family of his own."

"Married my daughter, didn't he?"

"Certainly, but ——"

"Then why ain't it all in the family?"

"But there doesn't seem to be any business basis to this arrangement whatever. Just where does the boy stand, anyhow?"

"Good land sakes alive! You don't imagine for a minute I'm gonna let him come in here and run wild — do as he pleases — run me into bankruptcy, possibly?"

"That's what I'm trying to get at, exactly." I decided I should give my curiosity justification. I said: "He's been over to the *Telegraph* office talking with me about a contract for advertising. As a matter of credit I dropped in to learn what the chances might be for getting our bills met promptly."

I thought Henry Parker's heart would stop its beating. He sagged for an instant over his workbench, then looked around dazedly. "The nerve of him!" he cackled. "Throwing good money away for space in a newspaper. *My money!*"

"Well, you've either given him the business or you haven't. Which is it?"

"All right. Put it that way and I haven't."

"Good! Then maybe the boy will see where he stands and come back to his job on the paper!"

"No, he won't!" snapped Henry Parker. "I told you he was gonna help me wait on my trade!"

CHAPTER IV

A MAN'S CASTLE

The Garfield property on Pine Street, colloquialized as The Ark, was a cavernous double structure of lugubrious red. It stood on a corner lot, every window hidden by the heavy foliage of unpruned maple trees. Gene Garfield, a carpenter, had built the place back in 1895, immediately christening the premises by cutting his throat in an upstairs chamber.

Gene apparently had an obsession for things red; the outside walls were painted red, the woodwork inside was red and so was most of the paper. No sunlight ever found its way in the house because of the trees, the rooms were shadowed and high, and in the night they gave off noises. Doors opened and closed mysteriously. Blinds banged with no wind to bang them. In the still hours of very early morning, local rumor had it that trunk covers were heard to slam down in the attic, and unexplained footsteps sounded across unboarded rafters.

Allie was contemptuous of ghosts. She maintained the Garfield place was a "buy" and had visions of Dave realizing vast sums from local real estate, profiting by the squeamishness of neurotic former occupants.

Pa Haskell wasn't exactly contemptuous of ghosts. Still, he was not indifferent. If Gene Garfield's spirit stalked the premises with its ghostly throat showing aberrations, that circumstance offered interesting experiments in psychic phenomena. Nothing like living on the same premises with a spirit to prove the fallacy of its existence.

The prospective husband had first wanted to prune those frowsy maples in the front and side yards to admit more light to the rooms. But Mother Parker — "who simply adored a cloistered atmosphere" and never missed attending any funeral where in life she had attained to the slightest nodding acquaintance with the corpse — had joined forces with Pa Haskell and the two of them agreed it would be

sacrilege to touch a leaf or a limb of the magnificent bowery. "It also gives such wonderful privacy," she contended by way of apology for her interference. So the rooms continued gloomy.

Then for a time David had wild notions of painting the structure. Allie had talked him out of that. "What's the use of wasting our money for paint if the trees only cover it up?" she demanded. "We got to be economical." In this last she was confirmed by her father. "That's right. Never spend money for nuthin' you can get along without," Hank averred. "It's the only way to get ahead." Which advice also prevailed when Dave came to the question of painting and papering the downstairs rooms.

Pa Haskell, having sold his Foxboro farm in order to pay for the Garfield property, had moved into the village before the wedding and taken temporary quarters with David at the Widow's. Subsequently he spent his days at The Ark, walking the premises with cant-hook thumbs hung in the armpits of his vest, squinting with one eye at cornices and gables, pacing distances in the yard, or standing around the rooms where mother and daughter labored and pointing out places which their washings had not covered. It is not of record that he ever assisted in any way whatever, except that once he had knocked down a wasp's nest on the back veranda and on another occasion had rolled up a piece of old hen wire and pushed it with his foot down a cellar bulkhead.

In those days preceding the wedding, too, which were not given over to preparations in the Adams Street house for the event, Allie and her mother visited Blake Whipple's furniture store and ran up a bill of seven hundred dollars — one hundred dollars on deposit and the balance at ten dollars a week for a year and eight months. David had drawn his savings from the bank, keeping out a hundred dollars for his wedding trip to Boston and the bridal bouquet. Mother Parker supplied the deficiency from her hen money, a loan which David was not permitted to forget throughout the next ten years. The deposit was paid before David had seen any of the purchases except a heavy gold picture of some dead trout to be hung over the sideboard in the dining room. In these shopping trips the women were amply assisted by Ruthy, who had an idiosyncrasy for hitting

upon all the more expensive pieces and pouting and throwing herself on dusty lounges elsewhere when her selections were disregarded and her elders bought "junk."

"But you've got *three* chamber sets!" protested David, when this mass of household furnishings was dumped in The Ark. "We only need two—one for you and me, the other for dad."

"How about mother?" demanded Allie. "I guess she's always going to have a room at my house if she wants it and it's going to be ready and waiting for her at any time she comes to use it."

To this, David could offer no argument. If his father was "making his home" with the newly-weds, it was only equitable that "her mother" should likewise have accommodations. Besides, hadn't "mother's money" helped make the first payment on the furniture?

The Jumble Shop, of course, was periodically visited for whatever was lacking in the smaller appointments. This might have accounted for Henry's funk the afternoon of my visit. The man could not conceive how many thousands of dollars' worth—the estimate is Hank's—of smaller wares had been pilfered from his place by his female relatives and he worried a lot about it.

So after a fashion The Ark was furnished. Both husband and wife were rather disappointed when they beheld how sparsely seven hundred dollars equipped the household's ten rooms when the confused pile of furniture had been uncrated or otherwise unwrapped and distributed from hallway and parlor. But Allie contended they would "pick up little things for the corners" as they went along and Mother Parker was extremely helpful in sending old Rufus Hibberts, the one-eyed expressman, up to The Jig-Saw House for this and that which she and her spouse would never have further use for. It was truly amazing how many articles she and Little Hank would never have more use for. And when the latter visited the new quarters after such periodic raids, he blinked in astonishment at the appearance of some familiar piece of furniture and gradually charged the depredations up to David. But he said nothing to his womenfolk. He didn't dare.

David frantically looked forward to the days when he and Allie should occupy the premises in reasonable quiet and

privacy. But it was never to be. First, Pa Haskell's presence could not be ignored. Secondly, Allie gave it out that immediately she returned from her wedding trip, Mother Parker was coming over for a week and live in her new room, "just to give her a change," as the new wife expressed it.

Furthermore, there was Ruthy and Willie. It developed that the Haskell's had not acquired more than three appointments of which Ruthy approved—a gilt chair for the hallway, a tremendous vase at the door to the sitting room, which should do service in inclement weather holding umbrellas, and a striped-awning swing which attached to the front veranda roof and which Pa Haskell promptly appropriated and used in pleasant weather for the remainder of the season.

Willie was of great assistance in sending to the hardware store and Jumble Shop for articles forgotten; he likewise dragged queer bottles and urns from under cellar stairs, and left them where the new occupants could slip on them and end up at the bottom of the flights on their individual and collective chins. Willie likewise explored the unfloored attic, slipped once and thrust a leg down through the lath and plaster of the room expressly to be Ma Parker's—because it was the biggest and sunniest in the upper story. Thereupon Mother Parker was transferred to the *next* best room and Allie and David took a small stuffy compartment off the upper landing. Pa Haskell wanted the chamber in front with the windows looking into Pine Street. The chamber with the broken ceiling was utilized as "the store room" and the door locked into the attic so Willie could not repeat his experiment and spoil every sleeping room in the house.

It was to The Ark that David turned his steps that first night of his married life after relinquishing his place at the newspaper office.

"Well, what ails you?" Allie demanded. She and her mother had been trying to straighten a stovepipe and the pipe's obstinacy had not improved their patience.

"Nothin', I guess," the boy said ruefully.

"There must be something or you'd never edge in that door as if you were Garfield's ghost."

"Well, I just had a talk with your father at the store and I don't exactly know where I fit."

"Why don't you know where you fit?"

"I thought he was goin' to get out and give the store to me. But I guess he really meant a sort of partnership."

Allie considered, arms akimbo, hair awry, nose sooted, looking at her husband as an irate mother might regard a chagrined small boy she has caught with wet hair.

"I'll tend to him to-morrow; he'll listen to me. You hop up on this stepladder and drive a nail in the ceilin' for this wire." And Allie made a sweep in the direction of the refractory flue as though she would demolish it with the hammer.

"Whatter you expect of a stove that only cost twenty-seven dollars?" contributed Ruthy from the doorway. "If you'd had a brain in your head you'd have taken that nice enameled white one."

"—that cost a hundred and seven," snapped Allie.

"Well—if you'd married something else beside a pill, he'd been able to get you a stove that cost a hundred and seven." This with Dave on the ladder asking where he should drive the nail.

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Allie, as her lord and master reached too far, almost lost his balance, waved his arms wildly a moment and nearly came down on the stove top, where the covers awaited blackening. Whereupon Mrs. Parker said something akin to "children, children, little birdies in a nest should always agree," and David succeeded in driving the nail.

A crash was heard in the cellar at this point, followed by a tragic silence. Instinctively Allie gasped, "I'll bet it's Willie." Marvelous intuition! Of course it was Willie. Willie had discovered the cellar swing-shelf. It looked like a dandy trapeze. But it was already loaded with preserves contributed by Mother Parker. Willie's additional sixty pounds had quickly proved too much for the cleats. Shelf, cleats, preserves and Willie were in a ghastly muck of ruined jars on the cellar bottom. It was a highly successful crash. It even brought Pa Haskell indoors with a loud clumping from the front piazza where he had passed most of the afternoon reading "Spenser on The Planets."

"Spenser on The Planets" was quickly forgotten in the complex of Willie on the cellar floor. He was too terrorized at the wreckage to shriek. Or maybe he had landed on his

head. At any rate, forty Mason jars of blackberries were ruined grievously and the swing-shelf hung by one end. Willie's anatomy was later gone over with tweezers for slivers of glass that might "work" into his innards.

Attic or basement were alike to Willie. He could thoroughly be relied upon to work havoc in either.

Like a cat in a strange garret, David moved through the rooms of his "castle" that evening. Once he went so far as to declare he thought it might be better if they transposed the gilt chair in the hall for the umbrella vase in the sitting room and gave as his reasons that no one would possibly sit down in the hallway, whereas rainy-day visitors would have to drag their puddling umbrellas all the way to the sitting room before being accommodated in the matter of a suitable receptacle. He even tried the substitution. But Allie said no, the hall was so dark it needed that gilt chair to brighten it up, whereas the vase in the hall by the same token could never be found without striking a match. And the substitution was corrected and matters left as she had arranged.

David would have sat down in the morris chair and read his evening paper if Pa Haskell hadn't gotten into it before him. "Well," he said philosophically, "guess I'll go downtown."

"Not much you won't!" corrected Allie. "You light a lamp and go upstairs to them trunks in the hallway. Unpack the stuff that's in 'em and put it away in our bedroom. Then, seein' Willie's gone home, unlock the third-story door and carry 'em all up attic."

CHAPTER V

A LADY REFORMED

There are periods in our lives which hold no place in memory beyond the recollection of a mere location. We know that we existed. We ate our daily meals. Presumably, too, we did our work. Friends associated with the location surrounded us, we had our hours of pleasure, our nights of anxiety, and looking backward we recognize that the great organization of existence functioned inexorably and we functioned with it.

I affirm that such a period now ensued through the two years immediately following David's marriage — the balance of 1908, all of 1909, and a month at least of 1910. For that is the time span during which our ex-reporter filled the office of merchant in Paris, Vermont. He ran The Jumble Shop with Little Hank. Only we ceased calling it The Jumble Shop. It became the Pull and Haul Bazaar for reasons presently to be disclosed.

He had halfway conceded — Henry had — though never without a certain inner resentment — that in the matter of someone to wait on aggravating customers, a son-in-law might have his points. Also the man had not passed lightly over a series of persuasive advertisements in the Boston Sunday supplements in which the vast profits accruing from growing mushrooms in one's cellar were duly set forth in attractive red type.

To wholly divorce himself from the store, however, to hand keys, rights and cash drawer over to an untried young stranger, to step down and out and figuratively have no place to lay his commercial head thenceforth, was something which the puckered little man never clearly considered.

The family had talked about it for years, all the same. The prospective son-in-law had appeared on schedule. Wedding gifts had poured in from relatives and friends and in a vague, subconscious way it seemed up to Henry to do his stuff. He had expected vast credit and acclaim for this altruism, but — been grievously disappointed.

The family had taken it for granted; the relatives and local acquaintances had implied by reactions that Hank was pretty much a fool. So within twenty-four hours of tying the nuptial knot, the little man was in rebellion.

Neither was Allie's attitude toward David's connection with the store clearly defined. She had heard his praises sung as an embryo newspaper genius; she had been advised that as a writer her husband might make his mark. She had realized, however, that it might be a long time before the *Telegraph* could pay him more than twenty-five dollars a week at the most, while as for embarking on a newspaper career of his own, of course he grievously lacked the capital. Meanwhile, here was the store. All the female Parkers were positive that its financial possibilities had never been conclusively exploited. If David needed money for a string of country papers, might he not make it at the store? She thought that he could and decided he would.

To The Jumble Shop Alice strode the following morning therefore, with David in tow, like an irate mother whose youngster has been assaulted by a neighbor and who means to have justice if she knocks down the pillars of society.

Exactly what transpired in The Jumble Shop in the next two hours between father, daughter and daughter's new husband constituted one of those scintillating but tiresome little episodes not worth the effort to set down minutely. What really matters to this chronicle — as what really mattered to the town — customers in The Jumble Shop that following morning entered the place and left it without being waited upon in any manner whatsoever, and along toward noon a perturbed and frumpy little man banged out of the place and left it in the possession of two young people, who immediately hung a CLOSED FOR ALTERATIONS placard behind the locked glass door and set themselves to confronting the surprises turning up in the stock. It became a sort of game — open a crate and learn what it contained.

Henry went home grinding his finger nails into his palms and was closeted the rest of the forenoon with his wife. The result of that conference appeared further unfavorable to Little Hank's interests, for he was seen at the railroad station at two o'clock carrying a hand valise. He boarded the two-forty train and left town.

It was nothing serious, however. The man only went as far as Rutland, where he secured a two-dollar hotel room, got into bed and read a packet of nickel novels around the clock. He had registered similar demonstrations with his family before. He fancied they worried themselves sick over these absences on the ground that he had deserted them. But he always turned up when his spleen worked off. He could no more desert Paris, The Jumble Shop, his home on Adams Street, than he could desert his name, his shadow, or the raiment wherewith he was clothed. Only on former occasions the store had remained locked and business suspended until he came back with a sort of Well-I-see-you've-got-the-same-old-cat expression. This time, although the store remained locked, business did not wholly suspend. Allie and David were doing things to the premises such as never had happened before.

"B'gad, Cross Street ain't the same old place," lamented Uncle Joe Fodder next morning. "Henry Parker's washed his winders."

The Jumble Shop, however, was "in" for more than any mere washing of its windows. The old riot of sidewalk goods which Henry lugged out in front every morning and back in the store every night, was permanently taken from public exhibition. The sewing machines, the folding camp stools, the cartons of vanilla extract came out of the window. For the first time in twenty odd years that window was decorated — after David and his wife had played at the game of discovering the stock.

They found rat traps and cans of tinned beans. A consignment of ladies' blouses with mutton-leg sleeves was found buried beneath a small packing case of inkstands and pen-wipers. School supplies took equal honors with a barrel of mustache cups hidden for years by the cellar stairs.

The town got the surprise of its life, however, when on the sixth day — Henry still remaining away — Jacob Cobb finished painting the front and his men brought ladders and hung up a sign. In great gold-leaf letters the town was advised that the place in the future would be known as:

THE P & H DEPARTMENT STORE

Parker & Haskell, Props.

Out of deference to the feelings of the absentee — who might return, look upon the sign and be assuaged — David had insisted the emporium adopt the aspect of a partnership. But a town has a cruel way of looking at such an arrangement. Before the week was over, all Paris knew of David's tilt with his father-in-law.

"P & H Department Store?" grunted Uncle Joe Fodder. "Parker and Haskell, I s'pose? I'll bet a plugged nickel them letters will stand for Pull and Haul before Dave's through." The crowd laughed and the witticism was repeated. All over the town and valley it spread. And The Jumble Shop no longer continued as such. The Pull and Haul Bazaar it was publicly christened within the fortnight.

And upon his return, Little Hank saw it and helped it live up to its title.

That year of 1909, with David in the thick of running the Bazaar with a resentful father-in-law and making such money for both as he could, I recall one incident which should not be ignored. On a gray, depressing day in early March, I had business down in the Raven & Gates paper mill. After the *Telegraph* was published for the day, I took the route southward along the railroad tracks and river. I went down to hunt old Artemus Bradley, superintendent, and secure details anent the passing of a relative and former resident.

Treacherously warm around noontime it had been, clouding up to a flurry of snow along toward late afternoon. As night now approached it grew wintry cold and ice sheeted over the edges of the river. I passed the Process Works and had nearly reached the plant of the Paris Light, Heat and Power Company, when ahead of me down the aisle of empty freight cars I saw a woman's figure.

From the distance this woman looked shabby, suspicious. A large, floppy hat, bedecked with ribbons and flowers, partially concealed her face. Her brownish jacket was unbuttoned — or buttonless — and in her frequent pauses she kept a hand beneath it as though hiding something forbidden. She braced herself against a freight car with the other and traveled with considerable difficulty. As I passed her I cast a sideways glance at her face.

The woman was Lillian Whalen.

Something had happened to Lillian beyond incipient in-

toxication. She had reached that period in a young woman's life where she takes on height and changes weight even in a year. Lill Whalen had grown pretty — with a pale, emaciated beauty that startled me even more than her reappearance or inebriation.

First, her features had lost their saucy, girlish impudence. Mouth and chin had become vaguely prominent, her profile cleaner cut. Her eyes, slightly glazed, were sharper and deeper, too — green with the virility of ocean water. Her tawny hair was gathered in maturer fashion in a knot at the rear of her neck, and the floppy hat in place of the careless tam had changed the aspect of her character completely. As for her figure, that too had matured — with a sort of dangerous, sensual maturity that spelled a hard time ahead for the offspring of old Jeek Whalen if she permitted life to buffet her with no moral rudder to bring her safely into the port of ultimate respectability.

I would have passed her as she swayed there with a beety hand clutching the frosty grab-iron had her face not halted me. There was blood upon it.

"Shay!" she greeted me. "Be a shport, you! Giva feller a hand."

"Give you a hand where?"

"Paper mill. Goin' there. Have it out with Buck Pinney. Shee my faish, doncha? He pushed it in."

"You better go back uptown, Lill. Leave your fuss with Buck until to-morrow."

"Gesh I know own bishnesh. You jesh help me, thash all."

I had small inclination to pilot the tipsy girl among the freight cars and across the narrow footbridge over the race-way to visit twisted vengeance on a recalcitrant mill hand. "You better go back uptown," I repeated. "How long since you got out of Vergennes?"

She tried to straighten herself with dignity and fix her hat. "Nobody'sh bishnesh how long. Buck Pinney. You wait. I'll fixsh him. Shee if I don't."

"You don't want to make yourself more trouble, Lillian. What's Buck done to you, anyhow?"

She told me. It was not a pretty recount.

"Can't you get a job anywhere — find some work to keep you respectably? You're really too good-looking a girl, Lill, to ——"

"Won't work," she retorted. "Me — I'm a lady." And forgetting her tears and her wrongs, she tried to draw herself up anew.

"Have you got any money?" I asked her.

She finally confessed that she was penniless.

"Will you go back home if I'll give you some money — and promise to speak to Pinney for you myself?"

"Maybe," she compromised.

I therefore gave her a five-dollar note, which she took somewhat stupidly, declaring at length that I was "a good old coot" and started back up the freight tracks. Sadly considering the cruelty of life to some unfortunates who seem in no wise responsible, I headed into the mill.

I met David in the office. "Hello!" I cried. "What are you doing here?"

"Came down to look at some counters and tables. For the store. Mr. Bradley told Allie's father they were throwing out a lot from their shipping room. I might get them cheap."

"Where's Artemus? I want to see him myself."

"Upstairs somewhere in the mill. A pulley burst, or something. He said for me to wait."

I passed through the offices, into the sample and rag rooms. Then I headed into the beater room of Number One mill. I went on through the great iron doors to the rumbling, pounding, steaming machine rooms, greeting acquaintances, necessarily by pantomime, amid the noisy Jordans. Nowhere could I locate Artemus.

I rode up on the slow-moving freight elevator that lifted the jumbo rolls to the finishing rooms. Fifteen or twenty minutes I spent hunting the man I wanted. It was easier to go out through the rear upper door and skirt the entire mill than to retrace my steps through the labyrinth of machinery. Coming down toward the front of the plant again through an alley between two storehouses, I lost a step in alarm.

I had heard a shot!

The alley opened into a triangular inclosure near the offices at the end of the suspended footbridge across the race. This space now bumbled with people. Sashes were being thrown up on the floors above me; employees were hanging out excitedly.

I no sooner grasped that some sort of fracas was in progress than a woman screamed — horribly!

Men in the engine room ran out. We pushed together through a knot of spectators. The woman who had screamed was Lillian.

A swarthy, coal-blackened fellow in red undershirt and faded overalls was clutching her blue-veined wrist. His other hand was hooked about her throat. I saw a smear of blood on his arm. The girl was gasping, clawing, writhing. And again and again she screamed.

"What's the matter?" I demanded of a near-by youth.

"She called him out of the boiler room and plugged him!"

"Plugged him?"

"With a gun! He's tryin' to get it away. Look out for another bullet if she pulls the trigger!"

About and around they struggled, the girl's hat off and trampled flat, wild hair down, sleazy garments parting in the seams and stitches. She bit and tore and wailed. Buck was a powerful, square-skulled fellow with burned-out eyes and cruel lips. But muscular as he showed himself, Lill fought him fiercely. He could not get at the hand that held a long-barrel, blue-steeled revolver.

Twice Buck bashed the girl's mouth, savage blows that should have broken teeth. His forearm throbbed with rich red blood pulsing down from his wounded shoulder. In jealous, murderous rage, abetted by the liquor, the girl had turned leopardess. Buck twisted the gun behind her back and knotted up her arm. Shrieking with agony, the girl relaxed her hold. The weapon fell in the snow. Buck kicked it aside and spun her reeling — sprawled her half-senseless, bloody, disheveled — near the office steps. She curled in a half-circle, sobbing hysterically. Buck with his big foot on the gun, whipped out a rag and swobbed his elbow. The crowd looked sheepish, sobered, worried.

Lillian continued to sob. But the tussle, the bruises, the sting of the cold, were gradually clearing her brain. She was in greater distress than at first suspected, for two bones were broken in one flaccid hand.

Such was the tableau when David appeared and stood for a moment transfixed at sight of a woman prostrate on the ground. Then his countenance flooded with wrath. It was the first time I had ever seen him angry.

"Who knocked her down?"

A dozen tried to tell him while the battered girl pulled herself across and groped for him as best the hand permitted. Buck answered savagely:

"She came at me with a gun and I smashed 'er!"

"What gun? Where?"

The fireman kicked at it — a sinister .32.

"What for?" But Dave was compelled to give attention to the woman. Before Buck could answer she sobbed a piteous explanation of abuse and wrong.

"How about it?" Dave demanded.

"'S my business, I guess. I said she come at me with a gun."

"That's no reason for you to beat her up!"

Buck's arm was afire. He bridled. "Well, what *you* aimin' to do about it?"

I saw Dave's mouth close grimly. Once or twice an eyelid fluttered. "You want to find out?"

The men were watching. Buck could not retreat. He answered in kind. Reaching out he gave David's nose an insolent wrench. It pulled David forward. He stumbled and sprawled. Some girls in an upper window giggled nervously.

Dave rolled over but gained his feet. His face was scarlet as he turned and came back. His shoulders dropped, his arms dangled loose, eyes, saber-sharp, glued on the young fireman's face.

He seemed to strike before he reached Buck Pinney — an upward blow that cracked like a hammer.

Buck gave a grunt. His head snapped backward. He tried to recover, but reeled around groggily. Dave came closer, saw an opening, took it. A second blow plowed through Pinney's scalp. A third caught him squarely on the heart. A fourth made a mess of his mouth.

Buck bellowed horribly and spat out teeth. Or he opened his mouth and they dropped out in fragments. Again and again Dave struck as Buck crouched low for an opening. He got it — once. Dave went backward and rolled over twice. But Buck delayed an instant too long in recoil. One, two, three blows Dave battered him when they mixed for some wicked in-fighting. I wondered where the boy had learned it. The fireman's head whipped backward contin-

ually. Suddenly he went sideways against a pulp pile. He slid down groaning, his face in the snow on one elbow. Less than a dozen blows had wrecked him.

"Holy Moses!" cried a beaterman. "Almost before it gits started, he goes off t' hear little birds sing sweetly."

But David paid scant attention to Buck — or the crowd. He bent over Lillian. "I guess you're hurt?" he said with concern. "Let me help you!"

I felt sorry for the girl. Some of the office women were for calling Chief Hogan and having her arrested at once. I stopped them. That would only mean another — and a worse — commitment.

We got her on her feet after a time. We helped her with her clothes and straightened her hat. She possessed no handkerchief and utilized her tattered skirt to smear away the blood and tears. "He busted me! He busted me — good!" she wailed.

"Yeah. I know," consoled David. "Put your arms 'round my neck. I'll carry you into the office."

It was vaguely pathetic, the way she offered herself. David slipped strong arms beneath her. Yet even in her resignation I saw a physical grace that saddened me. If Lillian could only have been born under different circumstances, had a happier childhood, what a woman she might have made! I think it was the dissipation of that womanhood that bothered. Dave bore her into the office.

The employees of office and mill crowded around or peered in at doors and windows. Dave laid his burden down on a smooth, hard, black-leather sofa in Tom Raven's outer reception room. The office girls made wry faces at thus being brought into contact with Lillian and showed themselves as insolent as women may be when others of their sex are ill-flavored. The Whalen girl, however, might have been a princess of the blood, so compassionate was young Haskell at her predicament.

"Draw some water, somebody. And let me have a couple of them towels hanging from the cabinet. 'Phone for a doctor, Bill. Hurry up! I guess she's hurt pretty bad."

"He smashed my hand," repeated Lill like a little injured child.

"I know. I'm sorry. Let's see if we can mend it."

Evidently no person, man or woman, had addressed Jeek

Whalen's daughter in that tone before. Lill looked at the boy from feverish green eyes. "Why, you're — you're the fellow — who appeared against me!"

"I know," the boy admitted again. "But I didn't do it on purpose. And I've always been sorry. Terribly sorry!"

"Why are you doing this for me?"

Dave pulled away, bewildered. "'Cause I'm sorry for you and want to help you."

"You're sorry for — me?"

"You're hurt. Any man's sorry, isn't he, to see a woman hurt?"

She didn't answer this. Just watched him — fascinated — from those sea-green eyes. And Doctor Johnson finally responded.

"Hello, Lill," he greeted. "In Dutch again, as usual — eh?"

"That's a mighty unkind thing to say, Doctor Johnson." It was David who rebuked him.

"Oh, rats, young feller! I've known these Whalens from way back!"

"Never mind if you have — she's a lady, isn't she?"

Johnson colored at that. "A lady!" He laughed. "Boy — don't let yourself get drawn into any more rumpuses with the Whalens. It'll stick to you till hell freezes over."

Lillian had partially recovered from her stupor. She heard this last. Her bluish face, ghastly with the welts and bruises, hardened visibly. "Yes," she snarled, trying to pull away from Johnson, "and you can go to the same place and take this dam' town with you!"

It was David who laid a hand on her shoulder. "He doesn't mean it, Miss Whalen. Anyhow, it doesn't make any difference with the rest of us. I know your hand hurts terribly —"

"You can bet ten dollars my hand hurts terribly!" Her voice broke with agony. But under Dave's coaxing, she resigned herself.

"I ought to have her up to my office," declared Johnson after a brief examination. "I've got to dope her or the pain of setting it may drive her crazy."

"All right — somebody 'phone for a depot taxi."

"Don't need to do that. My car's just across the bridge. But she'll have to be carried. She's close to fainting."

"I'll carry her," the boy volunteered.

He did. He accompanied her to the doctor's office and afterward helped her to her father's house—little better than a shanty—over behind Jim Thorne's north mill. He even assisted her into the place and sat her down in a chair.

Throughout all this, the girl continued dazed. Suddenly at his chivalry and solicitation, she broke down afresh.

"What's the matter now?" Dave demanded, confused.

"You're the first feller who's ever been decent to me—like this—*in all my life!*"

"Aw—shucks!" laughed the boy. And, face very red he quitted the house.

CHAPTER VI

PROLIFIC ASHES

Few local cases ever came under our journalistic observation wherein a young man labored so hard for his wife's relatives and got so little for it as David Haskell in the spring and summer which now ensued.

Doubtless his boyish enthusiasm not to fear any task, no matter how sizable, had much to do with his industry. He felt convinced he could conquer hemispheres, planets, solar systems, and perhaps the Pull and Haul Bazaar made as good a starting point as any. But deeper than that, came a pleasurable concession to his boyish vanity that in regard to his relatives on both sides of the family, he was able to do so much.

The sudden cessation of effort on the part of those relatives in matters of their own support, the indolence they displayed in discontinuing to sprawl for themselves, shaped up at first as a sort of compliment to his own capacities. Dimly in the back of his head, after a fairly prosperous Christmas in which both Haskells and Parkers handled more cash money than ever before in their lives, the boy acquired the presentiment that he was their jelly-bean providence. Did his industry not feed and clothe them? They wanted much, perhaps. But what if they did? Give him time. He would procure it.

True, The Family did not give him much in exchange. As a matter of fact, when he seriously stopped to consider it, the family gave him absolutely nothing in exchange — which the same amount of hustle and ingenuity would not have brought him divorced from The Family. Pa Haskell paid no board and, being ill that second winter, soon cost the son far more than the old man's investment in the Garfield haunt. Ma Parker had helped buy the furniture and was unremitting in her gifts of edibles and services that "poor Allie might get along." But in return for these favors the woman spent far more time at Allie's than on Adams Street, and whenever she spent the day there, Ruth and Willie unerringly followed, and the three must be fed. They were not over-careful as to the cost of what fed them. Allie had a weak-

ness for tenderloin steaks; Mrs. Parker was partial to veal cutlets. As for Ruth and Willie, they specialized on fruit. If Mrs. Parker brought over a thirty-cent jar of preserves in the morning and remained to consume half a \$1.25 steak at noon and eighty cents' worth of cutlets at night, it was not to be resented "after all Maw had done" to bring her — Allie — to maturity and a home of her own.

Had David seated himself in cool judgment and figured up what his domestic affiliations were costing him as against what he and Allie might enjoy, even on an eighteen-dollar budget, he would have discovered himself paying a rather pretty figure for his most pretentious wedding present. Still, it is a fine thing to be a providence. It gives one the sensation of benevolent superiority. He felt that his relatives lived by the grace of his munificence. It was a form of power. It warmed him.

But in the post-holiday depression around that second New Year's, he had nevertheless begun to wonder just how and where he was to begin saving money for that string of newspapers and would it be wrong to snatch out ten-dollar bills now and then and hide them away in a bank? From first to last, up to the actual morning of the fire, the boy never quite got it into his mind that the store was his own, that he was anything other than a clerk with family privileges.

Talk with Allie about it he could not. Allie had a certain impatience about things, he discovered. Like every providence, he dwelt on a little mountain top alone. Deep down in the bottom of his heart, terrorized and overwhelmed as he was for several weeks after it came, he was not ungrateful for the fire. Folks about town subsequently talked about "that Haskell boy's hard luck." David knew better. He was secretly elated when the shock of it had passed. His heart had never been in the store. With growing frequency he had taken to locking himself in the rear of the place at night and writing vast quantities of general editorials to be preserved and brought forth against the day when his "string" should be operating and his managerial duties preclude literary composition.

It is human nature, I contend, that when fire sirens start proclaiming a blaze to a community, all citizens hope it will turn out a big one. Eleven thousand Parisians heard the

ominous whistle on the engine room of the Process Works that slushy January morning and hoped that hope. In which they were not disappointed.

The Cass Block in Cross Street, on the south side of which the P & H Department Store was located, was sandwiched in on the right by the Rafferty lodging house and on the left by the Farley property — with frontage housing a Chinese laundry, a Polish cobbler's shop and Uncle Isaac Levin's hardware and pawnshop. All three buildings dated back to the seventies. They were dry as pine kindling, as inflammable as celluloid.

No one seemed to know what caused the disaster. But young Dennis Rafferty had the thrill of his ten-year-old life when he opened the door under his mother's back piazza at eight-twenty o'clock, saw flames licking the inner partition and realized that at last he had a legitimate excuse for pulling an alarm without arrest. He used a brick so big it smashed half the box front, but it was a big fire anyhow and Dennis was commended.

Immediately everyone in the neighborhood "counted the box" and, realizing the blaze was somewhere in their midst, they started throwing up windows and pouring from houses. Smoke began rising from the rear of the Cass block and calamity impended. Truck drivers stopped their trucks. Grocers' clerks left their wagons. These vehicles remained exactly where the apparatus must shortly be located and their drivers jammed the side alley to agree there certainly was a fire somewhere and it "smelled like a beaut" and "they'd better stick around and see what happened."

Nobody made any real attempt to put the fire out in its incipient stages. It is reported that Mrs. Rafferty, the boarding mistress, scrubbing down some upper stairs when her small son discovered the calamity, made a feeble effort. At least the woman had a full pail of water on the stairs, but it was dirty water, muddied by her mop. When it had been emptied and a clean bucket drawn, the flames were too far advanced to admit of private control and the blaze belonged to the community.

"Bad mess! Bad mess!" bellowed Andy Sheehan, who drove the chemical wagon, Chief Carr not yet attending. "If you got any valuables inside, better rustle 'em out!" Whereupon started the general rush to save portable property.

Polcholz began firing out tools and shoes—anybody's shoes; rights or lefts were immaterial. Uncle Isaac had already saved his insurance policy. Charley Wing, honking maledictions in excited Chinese—which is far easier to understand than the ordinary kind—darted into his laundry and reappeared with several braces of live chickens, all held by the feet and squawking at once. Charley set them down out of danger and they seemed to be grateful. They stopped squawking at any rate and took to the air, anxious to give no one the slightest further trouble.

Chief Carr arrived. He began giving orders which everyone heard but no one executed; the hook and ladder arrived next, and the engine—after the horses had stepped on old Wilbur Nieson and a chemical extinguisher had gone off prematurely in Andy Sheehan's face. Ladders began to clatter up on all sides and the town's populace to collect and jam Cross Street.

The first requisite was to break as many windows as possible, regardless of whose windows or where they were located. Harry Parsons, Mike Delany and Herbert Whipple were all up on ladders smashing windows before the first line of hose had been laid from Main Street. The fire wouldn't work around to the front for a half hour yet and they might have entered the premises by a dozen doors. But why be a fireman if you can't smash your way in and run the risk of being nastily cut in the process? Besides, the windows broke with such a fine heroic noise. So by the time most of them were in slivers and ragged triangles on the walks below, the hose was connected and water was in order.

It was next discovered, as it is usually discovered at small-town conflagrations the nation over, that most of the hose wouldn't reach where it was wanted, and it became a question whether to change hydrants, wait till the fire burned around in front, or move the threatened buildings. Having smashed all the glass in the upstairs windows, the fire boys had nothing else to do than to crawl through into rooms, turn about and stare down at the crowd; so they decided to change hydrants.

It was something like twelve minutes before the first effective stream was playing on the blaze, and by that time the usual Little Helpers had volunteered for the scrimmage to get portable property which was burnable from the various

floors. There was no method and less order to this salvage. It was grab and throw, catch-as-catch can, get out of the way or be flattened.

Jim Allen got into the shoe shop and assisted Joe in firing out shoes — ladies', men's and children's sizes, blacks, tans and oxfords — the air rained shoes like festivities at a wedding. The first casualty of the morning was reported when Jim grabbed a vici kid on which the cobbler had been working at time of the alarm and heaved it along with the rest. Only it contained the cobbler's iron last and Henry Curtis, who had been catching most of the salvaged stock, muffed it. It went through his hands to his stomach and Henry lost all interest in the fire right then and there. He went off to one side and laid down gently where no one would step on him. Near-by spectators declared one might assume it was his property being devastated, he did so much groaning.

Over in the laundry, the same sort of thing was in progress. White shirts, brown shirts, red shirts and striped shirts filled the air while collars came out in showers. Charley implied with much honking that he wanted the crowd to assist in getting out his washing machines and baskets. But washing machines and baskets cannot be heaved about promiscuously and dirtied and ruined. Heaving a washing machine isn't sport, anyhow. It's work. And those helpers weren't present to work.

The articles rescued from the erstwhile Jumble Shop were far too numerous to mention. Bert Bliss came out juggling a pile of thirty felt hats and a dented saxophone. Sam Phillips did his duty for the moment salvaging two brass candlesticks, a portable bathtub and a case of hair restorer. Tools and watch fobs, cheeses, knives and bicycle sprockets, mattresses and egg-beaters, baby carts and leaky umbrellas — all came out by the truckload, were dumped on the sidewalks and later buried by falling débris. But what came out of the lower floor stores could not hold a candle to what came out from above. Mrs. Rafferty had over twenty lodgers and only three of them dragged their property down the stairs. The rest merely pulled it as far as the windows, raised it to the sills and pushed it over.

While this pandemonium maintained out front, the flames in the rear grew fiercer and hotter. Chief Carr gave orders for the structures to be cleared and turned his atten-

tion to saving the neighborhood. It was a sunny January morning without a breath of wind, which probably saved the business section. And as soon as Carr had announced his decision, came another whoop of delight from his helpers. They spat on their palms and grabbed tighter at their axes. Saving the neighborhood meant looking for more windows to smash or hacking holes in adjoining gables. A man by the name of Larkin, watchman at the Process Works, is reported to have slept through it all in the room of "an adjoining structure." He never knew what was happening, being accustomed to day noises anyhow, till Bill Leonard came chopping his way through a gable in a single-handed attempt to save the premises. It was a startling method of learning that one was sleeping next door to a holocaust—having a wild-eyed steamfitter come hacking his way into one's chamber between the ceiling and the washstand. Old Larkin decided he'd better get up.

The fire worked to the roofs with high wicked leaps of raw flame. Cornices curled; walls buckled. Interiors were lighted with great pillars of whistling, crackling, roaring destruction, seething red and orange. The lodging house "went," the cobbler shop, the laundry, the pawnshop "went." And The Jumble Shop went also. Heavy furls of smoke, bearing dangerous sparks, drifted over the town. Crash after crash began to come from Cross Street where the walls were falling.

I had seen David several times, white-faced, wild-eyed, knuckles bleeding, clothes ruined, giving instructions as to what should be saved and where it should be carried. Allie had long since arrived and was helping. So was Mrs. Parker. Henry was not in evidence, apparently conducting operations from the rear. There was pathos in the way these women tried to save the effects of their menfolk. Master Willie Parker, early in activities, had been severely slashed along one arm with flying glass. Which was providential, else he would certainly have managed to get himself burned to death when the disaster reached its peak along toward half-past nine.

Between eleven and twelve o'clock, however, the surrounding buildings had been chopped and saved, the firemen were covered with soot and glory, Uncle Isaac had fully recovered on nine years' futile insurance premiums, the three Cross

Street structures were a mass of tumbled brick, twisted piping and smoldering embers. On the whole, as a fire it was an epochal success and the local fire boys were to be congratulated on having given the taxpayers value for their money. A community fire is an engaging spectacle if one gets there ahead of the apparatus, keeps eyes and ears open and doesn't get felled by a flying bureau.

Yet there was an aftermath to this fire which made it never to be forgotten in our village. By four o'clock that afternoon the last vestige of smoke had vanished from the roped-off ruins. The nip of the January night was coating the upper embers with ice. At five o'clock David called me on the telephone.

"Have you seen father?" he demanded. He meant, of course, Little Hank.

"No. Why?"

"We can't find him anywhere." And the boy rang off.

At half-past seven I was working in the office when the door flew open and Allie entered. "Have you seen father anywhere?" She was a bit hysterical.

"David asked me the same thing, around half-past four. Is he missing?"

"Do you think I'd be hunting him if he wasn't?"

"When did you see him last?"

"Not since the fire was burning — when Chief Carr ordered us all to get out of the buildings."

"Did he carry much insurance on the store?" I asked, wondering if Little Hank could possibly have been responsible for the disaster.

"Father lapsed too many times in his premiums. They canceled it. But where is he? He couldn't have gone out of town."

All that night, however, Henry Parker stayed away. By the middle of the next afternoon David had two insane females on his hands.

Nine days later, about five o'clock of an early February evening, David fell into my office and completely collapsed. It was several minutes before he could speak. His hat was off. His face was pasty.

"Bill — *they've just found Henry Parker's body — what's left of it! — in the ruins — of the Cass Block basement!*"

CHAPTER VII

DEPENDENTS

Henry Parker had perished. There was no doubt about it. They took his charred corpse from the sodden débris and covered it with a blanket. Up to Blake Whipple's Undertaking Parlors they bore it. The lid of the casket was never lifted.

When the man had met his end, or how, not a soul could explain. Hit by falling débris or trapped by a wall of fire, the sallow, puckered, weazened little merchant would be henceforth but a memory.

A funeral was announced. But the Odd Fellows took it in charge, for Mrs. Parker was prostrated. She got up from her couch to attend the service, but collapsed immediately afterward — at Allie's home in Pine Street, not at The Jig-Saw House on Adams Street. As for the latter, she gave it out she never wanted to set foot inside it again; Allie declared so long as she had a home, it would never be necessary. This necessitated setting up cot beds for Ruthy and Willie in the parlor.

Allie went around glassy-eyed. On one rare occasion she crept into David's arms and wept copiously on her young husband's shoulder. The boy never forgot it, the circumstance was so unique.

But the bottom seemed dropped from the Parker-Haskell world. Little Hank was under six feet of ground; Mother Parker was a mighty sick woman. The store was no more. They had no money.

David was not exactly opposed to Little Hank's passing, if it really brought Allie into his arms. The man must die some time; what difference were a few years one way or the other? But the fact that there was no more store, that they had no money, made the dilemma cataclysmic. Somehow in the capacity of providence he must exercise himself or all would suffer. Eventually he came in to see me at the office. He didn't look like a providence.

"You can't expect us to throw Paul Lyman out and give you back your place, son," I said as kindly as I could.

"No. Of course not. I'll get a job somewhere, I suppose. I'm not afraid of work. But I'm pretty well shaken up!"

"If you're down to your last cent, son, I'll loan you some money. But if I were you, I'd go see Jim Thorne."

"Jim Thorne?"

"He's been far more interested in you than you may think. Half a dozen times this winter he's come in here to ask how you were prospering. He might give you a place in the mill."

"I don't want a place in a mill. I'm not snobbish or ungrateful. But — I wish I could get back on a paper. I never really liked the store a minute I was in it."

"Go talk it over with Jim. You'll find him sympathetic."

"Naw, I don't want to go blabbin' to him with my troubles. Besides, I want to see what Ma Parker's goin' to do. If she's goin' to live with us, I got to get a really *big* position."

"For heaven's sake — you're not going to attempt the support of Hank's dependents?"

"That's just the point. I don't know what the dickens they're goin' to do. Henry left no insurance and she's got no money."

"Then before I'd saddle myself with the support of five grown people — that kid brother of Allie's eats as much as two grown folks, I'll warrant — I'd have my row over with and get an understanding."

"It would cost me my — wife."

"Then let it cost you your wife. She's no wife or she'd never let you be imposed on."

"She'd pack up her things, take her mother, and leave me."

"Blaa!" I cried. "You don't know women."

"But she would. You don't know Allie."

"Then let her."

"I c-c-can't. I want my baby."

"*Your baby?*"

He nodded, flushing hotly, eyes averted.

"Is there a baby?"

"There's one expected — some time this summer."

"Lord!" I cried, dropping down in a chair.

"It makes — a difference," he added huskily.

I went over to the knitting mills next day and talked with Jim Thorne. The fat man listened to me gravely, eyes half-

closed, great jowls bathed in cigar smoke. He had a habit of swinging himself from side to side in his low-hung swivel, one big foot hooked on the castor of the chair.

"Poor sap," he finally affirmed. "If they have a youngster, that'll make how many?"

"You mean people he'll be supporting? Seven, counting himself."

"Seven people on his shoulders," sighed Jim lugubriously. "And he ain't got hardly wits enough to support himself."

"I can't exactly subscribe to that. If there was only some way of divorcing those relatives, I'm not so sure he and Allie—and their baby, if they have one—couldn't make a whack of it. Deep down inside he's not such a fool. He's lost a lot of his gullibility while running that store. But if he continues so soft-hearted that he thinks himself divinely commissioned to play the providence to all those people indefinitely, the day's coming when something tragic will happen. It's the people themselves that ought to have the riot act read to them, not the poor chap who's trying to do the best he can, according to his light."

"What do you want I should do?"

"I want you to loan the boy some money. Let him have five thousand dollars on a note—or fix it so he can get it. Tell him the *Wickford Times* is for sale and you'll back it if he'll go up there and run it *without his relatives*. There's nothing else open. He'll have to take it. In other words, introduce a situation which automatically divorces the relatives. And you'll be making a good investment because you need that paper's support in your coming campaign for the legislature."

Big Jim had been startled at first. Now he frowned. He crunched the tip of his cigar in a desk tray as a sign he wanted to continue with his work. "I'll drop up to Pine Street in a day or so," he promised, "and size up the layout for myself."

CHAPTER VIII

OTHER WOMEN

It was the second day of Mother Parker's being "up and around" that Big Jim kept his promise. It was likewise the second week of Little Hank's demise and the dismantling of The Jig-Saw House on Adams Street hill. For as David had predicted, Mother Parker was coming over to The Ark to permanently "make her home" with her married daughter, and The Jig-Saw House was a thing of history.

Allie answered the doorbell when the front veranda had creaked sharply beneath the tread of the mammoth millionaire. Her angular form was enveloped with an old blue wrapper; her reddish hair was drawn backward slovenly and twisted in a messy neck knot with half a dozen pins. The Ark reeked with frying sausage and onions. It was half-past six of a winter's evening.

"Thorne's my name," the visitor announced. "I come to make a call on your mother."

"Mother's indisposed," the daughter defended. "She hasn't yet recovered from poor Papa's passing."

"Indisposed fiddlesticks! I used to know your Ma when you was in heaven. Anyhow, I'm comin' in." And Big Jim did.

Zach Haskell was comfortably ensconced in the best chair in the front room, lazily puffing his pipe as he read the evening's *Telegraph*. He wore his slippers and vest without collar or tie. The vest was unbuttoned. On the opposite side of the table Ruth was busy over school work for the morrow. Willie on the floor was making a slingshot with which he would later break windows. Much of The Jig-Saw furnishings had been temporarily placed in The Ark's front parlor, giving it a choked and cluttered aspect. Zach frowned over his twisted spectacles at Jim's entrance and hastily removed his feet from a chair. Ruth and Willie scrambled up. Allie, behind the man's bearlike back, was glowering darkly. No one offered Jim a chair. He lifted one free of

the floor, tipped a pile of clothing off on to the carpet, slipped from his coat and seated himself with hands on bloated knees. "Well, where's your Ma?"

Mrs. Parker entered. Her hundred and eighty pounds of hips were wrapped in a dark brown house dress and she wore a red worsted shawl about ample shoulders. Her arms were bare to the elbows; there was nothing puny about them — they suggested strength that might fell an ox.

"Hello, Kate," was Big Jim's greeting. "Thought I'd call and pay my respects over Henry's passin'. How are you, anyhow?"

Mrs. Parker was puzzled. Still, she had the New England widow's rôle to play and she played it. "Poorly," she affirmed.

"Don't look it. Never see you lookin' huskier in my life. So these are your kids? Might o' been mine — what, Katie?"

Mrs. Parker smiled wanly. Smiling wanly was expected of widows. "I dunno's you ever met Paw Haskell," she suggested. "Paw, this is Mister James Thorne. He owns the knittin' mills and is rich."

Pa Haskell said "pleeztermeecher," and wondered whether he ought to retire. Then he recalled his money had bought The Ark and mentally vowed he'd be darned if he would. He put his feet back on the opposite chair.

"Well, Katie," went on Jim, "what's your program now, seein' Hank's put under?"

Mrs. Parker sank her tremendous hips gingerly on the edge of a chair and tried her utmost to look forsaken and forlorn. "I shall make my home with my daughter," she said with a dilapidated sigh.

Jim took note that old Zach was smoking and lighted a cigar without permission. "That so?" he demanded. "What for?" He looked around for a place to put his match. No one volunteered the civilities. He crunched the burned stick and thrust it back in the matchbox.

"I have no other place to go now." Life was hard, hard. So Jim was left to infer.

"Who's gonna support you?"

This jolted the woman. Jim's bluntness of speech also jolted old Zach and Allie. Mrs. Parker cast a hapless look at her "eldest." "Why, er — Allie has kindly consented to

care for my simple wants," she answered, "the little time I have to remain."

"Little time? How old be you, Kate?"

"I'm fifty-six."

"And you'll probably live to be eighty, hale and hearty and strong as an elephant. That's twenty-four years or so, you still got in this vale of tears. It seems to me your daughter's mighty generous with her husband's energy." The smug complacency of this family aggravated Jim almost as much as the odor of sausage. He detested sausage.

Allie bridled. "I don't exactly see what business it is of yours. This is my home, Mr. Thorne. And this is *my* mother ——"

"I ain't discussin' matters with you, young lady." Jim turned back to Mrs. Parker. "Who's gonna take care of your youngsters?" he demanded, with a jerk of his head toward Ruthy and Willie.

"We hadn't decided yet. Poor Henry leaving no insurance and all ——"

"I suppose you got a general idea Allie's boy husband is gonna get behind the support o' them also? It that it?"

"Mr. Thorne," declared Alice Haskell, "this is a house of grief ——"

"I know!" retorted the nettled man. "And accordin' as I get the picture, the grief's young David's. I hate to see his nose rubbed in it just because the lot of you are too damned indolent to care for yourselves."

If he had lighted a stick of dynamite and tossed it sizzling beneath Pa Haskell's chair he could not have perturbed his auditors more.

"What's that you said?" demanded old Zach. He crushed the paper he had been affecting to read.

"Guess you heard me plain enough. What *you* doin' here, anyhow?" And Jim looked at the ex-astronomer with his eye like a bullet.

"What — am — I — doing — here? Why, David's my flesh and blood son."

"Ain't got bog spavin, have you? Or crippled up with rheumatiz? Or lung trouble? Perfectly healthy, ain't you? What you sittin' around here for — takin' up space and consumin' his vittles?"

Old Zach grew white. He looked from face to face in

bleary-eyed amazement. "I'm here — because my son — asked me ——"

"What's that got to do with it? No reason why you had to accept, is it? Where's your love for the boy? Where's your desires to see him get ahead?"

"But when a man's my age ——"

"Just how old be you?"

"Fifty-eight."

"Six years younger'n me. And I ain't saddlin' my worthless old hulk on my young uns, just because I'm too lazy to get out and root for myself. Besides, even if the boy did ask you — which I doubt, unless you put the idea in his head — you ought to had sense enough to know he couldn't climb and make his mark loaded down with a lot o' drag in the shape of excess relatives."

"Mr. Thorne," put in Allie, her voice like a file, "doesn't it occur to you that your speech and your presence here is almost an insult?"

"Not a bit, young woman. Ought to be ashamed of yourselves — the whole kit and parcel of you. Kate, I'm especially surprised at *you*! When I knowed you, thirty years ago, you seemed a girl of sense."

"I'm a widder now ——" began Mrs. Parker.

"Strong and healthy, ain't you? Could earn good money as a laundress or cook — almost as much as the boy ——"

"My mother a *laundress*!" choked Allie.

"'Pears to me, young lady, you're one of them daughters pretty much sewed up in her mother's apron strings. What right has such a girl as you to get married?"

"Blood is thicker than water. A person's parents always come first if they've got any *character*."

"Warn't you properly married?"

"Of course I was *properly* married!"

"What did you promise the minister? Somethin' about leavin' father and mother and cleavin' to your husband and the two of you bein' one flesh, warn't it? How are you one bit different than the worst hussy that ever forsook her marriage vows and run off with a lover — like old Zach's wife here?"

"Sir!" cried Zach hoarsely, putting his feet on the floor with a bump.

"Baa!" snapped Jim at old Zach. "*How* are you different?" he demanded of Allie.

"Will you kindly tell us what's it all your business? Did David send you here to fight his battles?"

"He did not. I come of my own sweet will. And what I see — your attitude and all — convinces me of the worst. I pity the kid. He's in for a dam' hard scrape. And too kind-hearted to rise on his hind legs and speak his mind."

Twenty-five minutes of this sort of blistering ensued. And having done a good job, Jim arose.

"Think over what I've said," he ordered. "If you've got any mettle it'll help you see daylight." He got into his overcoat and started for the door.

As he was about to quit the room, however, came a quick step on the porch. A boyish figure was applying his key outside the glass. David.

He gave an exclamation at seeing James Thorne in the hallway of his humble domicile. But Jim raised his hand.

"Come along with me, bub," ordered the millman. "We'll go up to my place and have some supper and then you and me'll talk."

Big Jim's limousine churned in the snow drifts, got righted about, hurtled back down Pine Street, went westward in Main Street and up the long hill toward Vermont Avenue. The snow piles were high in the business section; people slipped laughingly or profanely on icy walks — depending on their sex. Most of the plate-glass windows were already furry with frost behind which the lamps of early evening were nebulous.

The big car scattered the snow blocks; its heavy tires cracked brittle sheets of surface ice. It dodged groups of shrieking youngsters sledding late on West Main Street hill. From the top of the hill, where Vermont Avenue bisects it north and south, the western sky was a cold, cheerless carmine dying into maroon and black. Frosty stars were already sprinkling through the stark, naked branches of leafless maples. It would be a nipping winter's night.

Though the mole-colored palace car was pleasantly warmed by the engine, almost no words passed between the millman and the boy till the campanile of Thorn Hedge came into view and Jim's chauffeur paused at one side of the road to permit a logging team the right-of-way so it might not upset

in the drifts. When a beautiful team of Percherons had stumbled and snorted past and the tinkle of their collar bells had died in winter distance, Big Jim announced, "Been up to your house this afternoon. Told your folks what I thought of 'em. Hope it'll do 'em some good. Doubt it! We'll have some supper with Mom and Carrie and then we'll talk. Couldn't talk to your home. Too much human rubbish clutterin' up your premises."

At once the boy was vaguely uneasy. Just what Jim had said and why he had said it was something to be learned in its own good time. But that it was something unpleasant was only too evident from the scowl on the millman's face. Never had his mouth looked more like a button.

They turned in between high cobblestone pillars and up beneath a *porte-cochère*. The car purred away to the stable garage. Jim slipped from his huge fur coat in the hallway and guided the boy up the inner stairs.

"You go in the library and sit a spell. I'll tell Mommer you're here," he instructed. "It'll perk her up that I've brought you back." Jim's speech inferred the boy might be a prodigal, back from years on a foreign shore where he had sustained his wasted frame on husks.

David followed instructions. He had left coat and hat in the lower hallway. He now entered a long, low room in the upper south wing of the house with a stained-glass window at its farther end and a fireplace on the western wall in which a couple of people might sit with comfort. There were also windows opening toward the east, overlooking the village and valley where evening street lamps were prinkling across infinite acres of snow; they looked like fallen stars. These windows and the door by which David had entered were hung with heavy draperies of blood-red velvets. Bookshelves reached to the ceiling. Midway of the softly carpeted floor was a polar bear rug of startling proportions and the atmosphere held a flavor of indefinable elegance.

One lamp burned at the corner of the divan before the ruddy fireplace as David stepped in. It only intensified the room's rich shadow. He gave a quick start when a voice addressed him:

"Good evening, Mr. Haskell. I'm glad to see you again."

It was Carrie Flynt. She had been standing between the heavy draperies at one of the eastern windows. Holding

to them with firm, small hands, she had turned from pensive reverie on valley and town.

Those months at the store had somewhat lessened David's shyness. "Same here," he answered carelessly. "How's everything?" But he did not take his eyes from her figure.

The girl's hair was done in a pretty pile high on her head. She wore a simple house frock of somber gray, gathered in a pucker at elbows and neck. Its pleated skirt disclosed fragile ankles.

There was something of the fineness of tempered steel about this delectable little person. She was a small-sized edition of a Venus de Medici. Less than five feet in height she stood — scarcely came to David's shoulder, in fact. A Toy Woman somehow, he thought, as her pretty curves were displayed before him. Beside her, Allie was an angular shrew. He winced.

"This is the first time I've seen you to congratulate you on your marriage," Carrie went on in her prim book-English. "Also to tell you how sorry we were to hear about your business misfortune and poor Mr. Parker's death."

"Yes," said David lumberously, turning to the divan.

"Mr. Thorne tells us you're expecting a baby," the practical little maiden continued — a certain forced flavor in her voice, as she strolled across to the fireplace and adjusted some mantel ornaments. "You must be very happy. I love babies. You must bring it up and let us see it."

David had visions of toting up a freshly born infant to this elegant household and setting it down stoically as a specimen of what he could do as a parent. He scowled.

"It 'll be young at first," he argued. "Babies aren't much on visiting — till they've got their eyes open, anyhow."

"Of course," assented Carrie.

"Two weeks, isn't it, before they do it?" He queried the girl in her capacity as nurse.

"Mercy, no! You're thinking of *cats*. Are you hoping it will be a boy or a girl?"

Fancy asking a male parent a question such as that!

"When I get married — if ever I do — I'm going to have oodles of babies." She fixed more mantel ornaments.

What was this faint impulse toward resentment that suddenly fanned in the boy? What could it possibly matter whom she married, or when, or how copious her offspring?

He himself was married now. She was merely one of the world's women, and must ever be, to him.

To even *look* at a woman now was denied him, much less take any interest in one as a prospective mother of babies. He tried hard to be indifferent, to strangle the wicked twinge of hunger in his heart. He did not stop to analyze that hunger, any more than he stopped to analyze what was wrong with Allie and his relations to his lately augmented family. Yet he knew it was there and had a subtle stab of conscience in consequence.

"Costs money to raise 'em, though," the father-to-be advised largely anent the copious offspring predicted.

"That depends on one's viewpoint, doesn't it — and how one manages?"

David conceded this might be true and thought how much the Little Toy Lady resembled a medallion he had once seen upon a Foxboro woman's mantel.

"Somehow I've felt interested in your career ever since the morning you brought me to town," the girl confessed. "We sort of started our experiences together, didn't we? — as though beginning a race from a common chalkmark?"

"Yes," and the boy had a blind, caged, fastened feeling. He wondered how he had ever decided her "bossy." But then, in those days he had not been so well acquainted with Allie's — well, ultimatums. "Only you didn't go gettin' mixed up with anybody before you knew your own mind," he growled savagely.

She gave him a quick glance of amazement. Was it possible that already he was — but no! It was none of her business. At once she was glad when Big Jim entered.

Mrs. James Thorne was a wan little woman, scarcely bigger than Carrie, who weighed eighty-five pounds and looked fashioned out of wax. She was also given to voluminous black silk dresses as though she tried to make up in clothes what she lacked in physique. She was consequently lost in these clothes which seemed to need periodic shaking up to locate the emaciated figure within them.

She had large, soulful, brown eyes, however, and when she smiled — which was seldom — there were fine-grained, patrician wrinkles down her sallow cheeks. But most of the time she bore a weak, hurt look and kept a molelike little claw against an emaciated throat.

She walked timorously and uncertainly beside her huge husband, clinging to his arm and assisting herself with a smooth, straight, ebony-black walking-stick. It was a curious old stick with a golden knob. David always had difficulty conceiving her as once having worked in a mill.

"My dear child!" she greeted David. "James has been telling me of your perfectly terrible relatives and what an awful time you're having to get along. I'm so sorry I could almost weep." Apparently she felt far worse over his predicament than the lad himself. She worried a lot over other people's troubles. It seemed to give her happiness.

"Aw, that's all right," Dave consoled her. "A feller can generally get what he wants when he learns how to boss 'em around." He implied he knew how to so manhandle them — high, wide and handsome. Still, he permitted that "perfectly terrible" indictment to stand. Perhaps he was thinking of the Little Toy Lady who seemed to have drawn closer to his elbow.

"Do tell me all about them. I'm sure they're a perfectly terrible weight. And you so young! There ought to be a law against it." She did not explain whether there should be a law against relatives being perfectly terrible, or David being so young — or persons of the male persuasion being weighted with domestic responsibilities before they have arrived at the proper opulence.

"Let's wait till after supper, Mommer," suggested Jim Thorne. "Carrie — ask Mrs. Fawcett if she's nearly ready for us," Mrs. Fawcett being the housekeeper and general supervisor of the whole Thorne establishment.

"Well, I'm terribly glad my husband's going to take an interest in you and get you started in a good business. From the first day you came here I felt you ought to be helped. You've got the sort of face that deserves it."

David glanced from husband to wife in astonished inquiry. "I didn't know Mr. Thorne was going to do any such thing as that."

"No, Mommer," stammered Jim, as though caught in a dereliction. "I hadn't told him that yet."

"But why keep it from him? It's a perfectly terrible thing when you've really decided to help him."

"There are times and places for — things. Let's go see what the neighbors have brought in to keep us off the town."

The elephantine husband lifted his wraith of a wife and bore her downstairs to her cushioned chair at the dining-table. It was a tremendous crypt of a room, done in golden oak. Mrs. Thorne sat opposite her husband, which placed Carrie opposite David.

The girl seemed a bit troubled throughout the meal which ensued. Several times the boy caught her clandestinely studying him. At such times she flushed and quickly averted her eyes. But she did not hang her head. She always tilted it. And the low table lights accentuated her slightly snub nose and the dimple in her well-formed chin.

It was pleasant — dining so in the warm, quiet, cavernous apartment, with the soft-footed Fawcett woman to wait on them — for beyond the cook and chauffeur-gardener the Thornes kept no other servants. So different from the cluttered crowded table in The Ark, with Pa Haskell blowing his tea in a saucer or Willie being constantly cautioned not to eat so fast or Ruthy admonished to remove her spoon from her teacup to avoid a liquid accident, or Allie always jumping up and running to bring in dishes from the kitchen or rushing them back, tucking away her uncombed hair between times or pulling together the dress at her bosom as she fed herself as best the family's clattering dishes permitted. Mother Parker had to be coaxed to eat even the most elaborate dishes, since Henry died, and was cautioned a dozen times a meal that if she didn't take better thought of her stomach she'd never be able to keep up her strength, until the cautioning became a nuisance.

The absence of tableware clatter — and relatives — soothed the boy and the little bit of wine which Jim poured for him was as nectar from Olympus.

It was nearly eleven o'clock that night when David finally climbed the grade up Pine Street and let himself in at The Ark. Ordinarily the structure would have been black as Pharaoh's tomb; Allie declared it a foolish waste to keep a lamp going after the family had retired, just because one mere husband had not yet entered. But to-night was not an ordinary night. Not after that detonating visit of the elephantine millman somewhat previously.

David's heart had been singing as he had mounted the hill. He was whistling unconsciously as he opened the door. But

the happiness died on his face and the whistle on his lips as he beheld the domestic inquisition waiting for him about the kitchen range.

"Anybody — sick?" he faltered.

"I'll say somebody's sick. I'll say we're all sick. Where you been this evening and why did you stay till eleven o'clock?"

"I been up to Thorne's."

"I thought so!" Allie turned to her mother with a look which said, "You see? He admits it!"

"Well, why shouldn't I go up to Thorne's? He's goin' to help me buy the Wickford paper. I'm gonna get started on my 'string' at last."

"Is that so? Maybe your wife will have something to say about that! You aren't so free to go and come as you were two years ago."

David was brought up sharply. His father was eyeing him in a way that meant trouble. Mrs. Parker was extremely red-eyed and occasionally snivelled. As for Ruthy, the gawky sister was whetting her lips deliciously.

"If I've got a living to make for this family, I don't see what the family cares so long as I make it."

"I don't suppose you place any importance on the unspeakable things that man Thorne told your dear father and my poor mother this afternoon?"

"What unspeakable things?"

"You don't expect *I'm* going to name them over. I'd as soon — blaspheme!"

"But I wasn't here. I didn't even know he was comin'."

"You've been with him to-night!"

"Because he asked me. And it's a good thing I did. He's gonna loan me the money to buy the paper up to Wickford. Can't you understand English? Buy a paper — a newspaper — my own! — *my first!*"

"How about this home that we've just got settled? Do you think I'm goig to pick up and move every time you and a man like Thorne get a brainstorm? That was poor Maw's trouble for years — one of the things *she* had to put up with. Until Pa leased the Adams Street place, she moved eleven times in fourteen years."

"I don't know nothin' about *that!* I know I got the chance to get my first paper and I'm not such a fool as to let it

pass." At the present stage of upset he did not deem it wise to add that the loan would only be forthcoming in the event that David went to Wickford taking no more domestic incumbrances than his wife and prospective child.

"Oh, children," sighed Mrs. Parker raggedly, "don't have any trouble over *me*. I'm not worth it ——" and she started to snivel afresh.

"The very idea, Maw! Of course you're worth it. I guess you been through enough so's it's my turn to look after you now." Allie turned back to David. "Mr. Thorne was here — *uninvited, I guess not!* — and told your dear father and my poor mother they were a lot of deadwood on you and they ought to be ashamed of themselves for coming to live beneath our roof!"

"Did he? Well, probably he thought you and I might like our home to ourselves, same as most married people."

"David Haskell! Are you standing up for him?"

"It's natural he might, isn't it?"

"You *are* standing up for him!" Allie looked from face to face as though conceiving no perdition awful enough for this viper they had nurtured in their bosoms.

"I dunno as I'm standin' up for him sassin' your Maw or my Paw. But I got to admit he's a pretty good friend or he'd never be offerin' to buy me that paper. It may cost as much as ten thousand dollars."

"And you'd borrow it at the price of your dear father's comfort and my poor mother's happiness?"

"But, Allie," David cried, a quaver in his voice, "it's a chance to get a paper of my own. What else can I do, with the store gone and everything?"

"Ask him for a job in his mill. Go to work as most men do and look after your dependents."

"But I don't want a job in a mill."

"Married men can't pick and choose. It's time that you learned it. Your Paw's gone to a lot of tremendous expense here to get this house. My Maw's give us about all she's got that's worth anything. We spent our time and our strength fixing it up. And no sooner is it ready to *enjoy* than you come sailing in with a crazy idea about tearing up to go to Wickford. Well, let me tell you one thing — if you go to Wickford, *you go alone!*"

"I don't like Wickford to live in," announced Zach

Haskell. "I was cheated out of two hundred dollars by the Wickford selectmen once — taxes on property I owned in the place."

"It's terrible unhealthy," Mrs. Parker contributed. "I've heard folks say it was malarial; it's down in a valley."

"So's Paris," argued David.

"But we've got several fine hills about Paris," explained Mrs. Parker. "Only the business section and the freight yards are down low here."

"I've got to take advantage of my opportunities," the boy maintained quickly, fearful of an argument with Mrs. Parker on local terrain. "None of you seem to grasp how big this is."

"I think we can get along without that man Thorne's money very nicely," decided Allie, "after what he said to-night and the way it means moving our happy home."

Whereupon David had what his wife frequently referred to as "one of his stubborn spells." "I'm of age," he announced, "and I'm goin' and that's all there is to it!"

Allie recognized the male symptoms and knew instinctively the only way to combat them was by having a "spell" of her own. She permitted hysteria to show itself openly. "What about your unborn child? But no, you can't expect a man without the slightest trace of filial love would bother his head about a woman he's got in a fix!"

"I call this an awful lot of unnecessary nonsense," the husband cried wrathfully. "You can all live here till I go to Wickford and get things started. Afterwards, if you want to move up there — after the baby's born, say — we can cross that bridge when we come to it." Thus might he side-step Jim's perturbing specification.

"Then *that's* all you care about us! Deserting us down here, leaving us to shift along any old way for ourselves, while you go up to Wickford a free man and enjoy yourself?"

"Calm yourself, Allie!" remonstrated Mrs. Parker. "Remember the baby!"

"I am remembering the baby. I'm remembering the time when I've got to risk my life for the baby's birth and no husband at hand for help."

"But what could I do if I was here?"

"The least you could do would be to comfort and sustain me."

David was not certain just what the process of comforting and sustaining a wife encompassed. He had a vague presentiment that in this dilemma his wife — the woman he had acquired for a helpmate — should be the one of all persons to back him up in his venture and comfort and sustain *him*. But he did not say so. He was the providence to these folk. He had to be big enough to bear with their little animosities and viewpoints. He turned to his father.

"You get my idea, don't you, Paw?" he begged.

"There's a string hitched to it somewheres," opined old Zach. "Millionaires don't come chasin' penniless boys with big families to support unless they got chestnuts they want raked from the coals. Heard this man Thorne wants to run for the legislature, ain't I?"

"Sure he does. And the Wickford paper's goin' to support him."

"Ah! You see!" And old Zach looked around at the family as though he had discovered a new constellation.

"But that's perfectly legitimate," the son defended. "Why have I got to have all this opposition from my own folks when it means an opportunity for all of us to get ahead?"

"There's plenty of other opportunities for you to get ahead," cried Allie, the tempo of her hysteria having been spoiled by Zach's discovery.

"Where are they? Show me one."

"If I'd married any kind of a man, he wouldn't stand there and ask his womenfolk to show him opportunities. He'd get out and make a few of his own. And not call on a nasty-mouthed millionaire to offer them, either."

Ruthy was enjoying the altercation immensely. The "pill" was getting it and getting it good. He deserved it. It was his punishment for not being a tall, graceful, dark-complexioned man with a top hat and curled moustache.

"When I thought of gettin' married," the boy growled candidly — the epitome of his stubbornness — "I never held the idea I'd be acquirin' so many people."

Allie picked him up quickly. Again her thoughts were of the effective tempo of her "spell." "Oh, you didn't? You didn't know you had a father, I daresay. You didn't know I had folks, a mother who demanded a change, brothers, sisters — ?"

"No, I didn't think they were gonna live with us — eat us out of house and home!"

"*What's that?*" Old Zach gave a violent start. "Don't be impudent, young man. You ain't so old yet you can't have your ears boxed."

But David ignored his father. "It strikes me, Allie, you aren't much of a wife when I've got a real problem to settle that means all our futures."

"I'm not *what?*" The girl could scarcely believe her ears.

"Oh, damn!" cried the husband. With a sudden sharp heartbreak he turned and left them.

Out the back door he went, down the slippery steps, off into the stinging winter night.

"He — he — *swore* at me!" gasped Allie. "My own husband swore at me — while burdened with his child." She put out a hand and grasped the kitchen cabinet. "He might as well have struck me!" she declaimed shrilly. At least her mother would give satisfactory attention to her "spell."

"I'll 'tend to him when he comes back," promised old Zach.

But he did not. For there was no going back on David's part that night.

David had a moderate sum of money in his wallet — of which The Family knew nothing. He was filled with pitiable enthusiasm for Big Jim's project. He knew a midnight train for Montreal passed northward through Paris and later halted at Wickford. He decided to teach his family a lesson in maturity by going up to Wickford at once. He had promised Jim to make the trip on the morrow, anyhow.

He went down to the depot and caught the train.

But in the odorous, overheated smoker a half-hour later, he felt suddenly old, alone and frightened — frightened with the bigness of life and its injustices. Came before him the vision of a Little Toy Lady in a library of soft lights and shadows — a girl of simple dignity, clear gray eyes, dimpled chin, exquisite figure.

"I bet she likes me," he thought. "I bet she's liked me all along!" He groaned. He leaned forward and laid his face on his wrists. "Oh, Lord, what have I done? I've married the wrong girl — that's what I've done! It should have been Carrie! Oh, Lord, Lord! *And it's done for keeps!*"

CHAPTER IX

EXCESS BAGGAGE

It was a Saturday night in late May that Sam Hod came into the *Telegraph* office smoking an after-supper cigar, one arm burdened with evening mail. I heard the slit and rustle of paper behind me and the creak of his chair as he later hoisted his feet on the exchange table's battered top. Suddenly he gave an opened newspaper a resounding whack.

"There's the best printed weekly in the State of Vermont," he announced. "And dam' the day any Parker female stole its proprietor's abilities away from the *Telegraph*."

I moved across.

"In three short months," the editor continued, "observe the difference." He fumbled at the bottom of the exchange pile for a familiar wrapper and brought out a copy of the *Wickford Times* under the former management of old George Stebbins.

Except for the heading, it was not the same paper. "Pop" Stebbins had plodded along with an eight-page, boiler-plate weekly, patent insides being printed in Boston. The make-up was slovenly, the ads didn't "lead," the headlines held errors. Half the foreign advertising plates could not be seen on account of poor make-ready; the papers after printing had apparently been folded by a blind man.

Under the editing and managing of one David Haskell, in a new dress of type the *Times* was a printer's dream — an editor's epitome of professional skill. The patent insides had been discarded, the battered, smudgy, hand-set eight point had been dumped for linotype faces, the rehabilitated paper resembled a piece of job printing — which carries adequate simile to whosoever peruses this page with practical knowledge of newspaper publishing.

"A born newspaperman's model weekly," pronounced Sam Hod. "That kid will go far, you mark my word!"

"How much money do you estimate he's making?"

"That territory must be good for a couple of thousand

two-dollar subscribers. That's four thousand dollars from readers." Sam turned through the pages, counting the advertising. "Twenty-six columns of ads at three dollars a column — average — means eighty dollars a week from his space. And eighty times fifty-two weeks means something like four thousand more from advertising. I'd say the kid should be clearing from two to three thousand a year for himself. Depends of course on his overhead and how much he's paying to Thorne."

"Monday's Memorial Day with no *Telegraph*," said I. "Guess I'll get out the car and run up to Wickford to see how Dave's coming along."

Wickford was a little crossroads community in the heart of a prosperous farming district northward in the mountains. The village proper held a scant five hundred people but was a buying and social center for more than five thousand. It had two main streets, — sections of the intersecting highroads running north and south, east and west. At this intersection the hamlet had clustered. The gray, two-story post office with Grand Army hall above it occupied the northeast corner. Diagonally opposite was the local bank. Across from the post office was a drug store, and from the bank an emporium whose piazza sign announced:

ORRIN O. SMITH

Groceries and Other Things

The only manufacturing industry was a long, low, chair-stock mill at the northern end of the village, painted a blistered brick red. On both main thoroughfares, back from post office, bank, drug store and emporium of other things, were additional stores, an ice-cream and fruit parlor, a harness shop, an optician's stand in the front room of his residence, a millinery ditto, three or four doctors' and dentists' offices, a feed store.

It was a typical Vermont community of the smug, prosperous variety, where every one knew everybody else's business, where anything might happen but nothing ever did, where the community fathers went about in shirt sleeves with vests unbuttoned in summer and ludicrous assorted garments of prodigious shape and bulk in the winter. Once a year it enjoyed a "cattle show" — when the farmers drove in from

miles around; in the winter its three churches held social dominance.

I had lived in Wickford as a younger man. I located the newspaper office immediately. It occupied a two-story wooden building on the road running west, just across the fifty-foot bridge from the prim white bank — for a musical, stone-strewn river ran down through the heart of the town from the chair-stock mill on the north to Wickford Pond two miles on the south.

The *Times* office shared the premises with a grocery store. The newspaper office occupied the river side, the business room and composing department were on a level with the bridge and sidewalk, the pressroom was in the basement with side windows opening on swirling water.

Immediately I noticed that "Pop's" windows had been cleaned, even as the make-up of his former paper. Being a holiday, town, stores and newspaper quarters presented an appearance of the Sabbath. But the office was unlocked.

I entered a room freshly painted, hung with calendars, auction posters, announcements of forthcoming concerts and picnics. A counter ran across this front office — facing the door — open end terminated by a roll-top desk. The desk was closed. A lanky boy with bulging eyes, khaki shirt and precocious long trousers clattered off a stool before a type rack and approached the front office to render me service.

"David around?" I asked.

"Naw," said this boy, reading the lines of his stick. "Gone up to the depot to see to his family."

I looked at my watch. It was two-thirty-five. "You mean his household goods are coming up here to Wickford to-day?"

"Yeah. Gonna have the tenement over the harness shop. Only one in town. Dave's been waitin' for old man Briggs to die all spring. Got the promise of it when old Briggs croaked."

I debated this while young Sparrow waited. I concluded not to bother David by going up to the station. I introduced myself and was admitted to the mechanical quarters — a long, low, pleasant room, unpainted and mellowed to a golden brown. Type-racks stood end to the opened windows. Against the opposite wall imposing stones thrust out. The southeast corner contained the linotype. The purr

of the gas flame beneath the metal-pot, the clicking of the types in the lanky boy's stick, the purling plash of shallow water down in the river bed alongside, combined with the holiday quiet of the hamlet, gave a pleasant, soothing, somnolent atmosphere to the office that many a city newspaperman may recall with yearning heartache.

I wandered around amid cases and stones. I went downstairs to the odorous pressroom where a high drum press and three or four jobbers derived their power intermittently from a rebellious gas engine. There was a paper cutter and a stock room, also a brand new folder and a rakish wire stitcher. The place was seductive — to a person newspaper born — with the fragrance of printer's ink, machine oil, linotype alloy, paste. I envied David his plant with no especial reason why I should do so. Yet there is a quiet charm about the office of a country weekly which maintains in the hectic, cluttered quarters of no city daily.

"How many people does David keep working?" I asked, returning upstairs.

"Him and me," responded the boy. "And old man Higgins and a feller he got up from Springfield to look after the press-work — name o' Rutherford. His wife's been in a lot and learned to stick type ——"

"Allie?"

"Yeah. But she's gonna have a kid pretty soon, I guess, and the past two weeks she's sort o' give up." And this crass young wiseman "shook down his cases" with dusty rattle.

"You do a printing business, too — I see by your imposing stones."

"Dave got a feller up from North Adams to work on the outside and hustle it regular. He does some reportin' and gets in collections."

"So Allie's been living up here with him and helping him out?"

"Naw. She ain't been livin' here regular. Come up to stay with him couple o' days at a time. That's why they're all movin' up — so's she can housekeep for him and do the proofreadin'."

"You mean his whole family is coming — old man Haskell and all the girl's relatives?" I cried in dismay.

"Yeah. And there's a cousin, I think, — girl name o'

Trotter. Folks is all dead. She had no place to go but her aunt's and so she kicked in — from some place over New Hampshire. She's gonna keep books in this office."

"How old a girl?"

"She come in here once with Allie. Big fat slob. Waddles. Smelt of castor oil and onions, too." The boy glanced out of the window later. "Gosh, train must be in! There's David now. There's the whole kiboodle of 'em."

I followed his gaze. From the side office windows I could look across the river to an open space of street between the savings bank and the barber shop. Along the sidewalk the Haskells and Parkers were advancing.

David was in the lead, lugging two enormous telescope bags. Allie came next — with a hatbox and bird cage. After husband and wife trailed their excess human baggage in a drawn-out line: Mother Parker with a hamper and armful of wraps, a strange female in her twenties with a shape like a mattress bound with a book-strap; Ruthy with a bright new traveling bag and a lunch basket; Pa Haskell trudging along on fallen arches and stopping frequently to survey the village as though trying to determine where he might locate the specific selectmen who had cheated him out of his taxes. Willie brought up the rear with two dogs on a leash — an Airedale and a hound. He also had some rabbits in a box with a handle.

"Gosh!" cried the lanky compositor. "*Are* all them his folks? There's an awful crowd of 'em, ain't there?"

"There is!" I said grimly.

"How the dickens they gonna cram theirselves into that tenement? They'll have to take turns sleepin' in the beds, or the old man might sleep with his feet out a winder. Big enough, ain't they? Take a whole cow to furnish him shoe leather."

I decided to go across to the tenement and apprise myself of the full extent of David's domestic encumbrances. Maybe I could be of assistance. I left young Sparrow and strolled across the bridge.

I saw The Family ahead of me in front of the harness shop as I turned the drug-store corner. They were gathered in a knot before the premises with all their accouterments and luggage, like delegates to a church convention being piloted to accommodations.

As I came up without being recognized, David was explaining nervously how the tenement was the only one to be procured in town and that maybe he and Willie could sleep over in the back of the newspaper office. Allie had a "it's-the-best-thing-to-be-done-this-is-what-a-woman-has-to-put-up-with" expression; Mother Parker was crooning that certainly they could manage somehow; the strange female was stoically indifferent and stared in various directions with a look of utter stupidity, Willie was wondering where he was to house his livestock, Pa Haskell was sullen. Of the brood, Ruthy was openly defiant.

"You mean we've got to live *here* — over a shop?" she demanded petulantly.

"Most everybody in the village lives over something — unless you buy a place of your own with land."

"Well, why don't you buy a place of your own, with land? You can't expect us to coop up in a garret."

"I haven't got the money to buy a place with land."

"You could borrow it. You borrowed it for the paper."

"Yes, and maybe I'm goin' to have a sweet time when Mr. Thorne learns you're all up here instead of stayin' down in Paris like he wanted."

"I'd be ashamed of myself," snapped Ruthy — who was now seventeen and caustic — "to be a grown man with a family and let a strange man run my affairs as though he owned me."

"Hush, Ruthy!" ordered Mother Parker. "How do we get into it, Davie?"

"There's a stairway up the side."

"Haven't we even got a decent front door?"

"Ruthy, I told you to hush!" Mrs. Parker's voice was sterner. "David's having hard enough time to provide for his little brood without makin' it worse with criticism."

The boy looked grateful for this. Then he saw me.

"I came up to find out how you were prospering, son. But I seem to have arrived while you're rather busy."

"I'm dyin' to talk with you, Bill. Wait till I show the folks the rooms. Come on up, Bill. It isn't much. But it was the best I could do — in Wickford."

We all climbed the stairs outside. I had a thrill of worry as the flight sagged ominously beneath the weight of so many — the strange Trotter female should have gone up

separately. There were four small rooms, freshly papered and painted. The floors were worn and uneven; in places the paint had been splashed on so thickly it had puddled and curdled. The walls were thin, the doors were out of plumb, all of the sashes were slightly twisted in their casings.

"It's rather small, but anyhow it's clean," crooned Mother Parker. "Let's be thankful for that."

"There ain't no piazza," protested David's father. "How'm I goin' to sit out in the sunshine unless there's a piazza? Doctor told me I *had* to sit out in the sunshine. And down to Paris we were fixed up so shipshape!"

"Oh, Paw, keep still and stop your complaining," Allie ordered. "You're getting it for nothing."

"I bought the place down to Paris," defended the father. The querulous way in which he said it showed how fast the old man was aging.

"Well, that's a closed book for the present," returned the daughter-in-law. "Seeing David *had* to be so headstrong. Willie Parker, you get those filthy dogs out of here! They're dirtying up these nice fresh floors."

"But where'll I put 'em?" wailed Willie.

"Take them over to the newspaper office," ordered David. I had visions of the newspaper office being pretty much of a catch-all for the Haskell family overflow.

"Where's *my* room?" demanded Ruthy. She was done with her inventory of the premises thus quickly and from the way she clung to her bag inferred if they didn't point it out at once she would travel.

"You'll sleep with me," announced Allie, who was trying to close a refractory window. "None of that private-room nonsense in this — dollhouse."

"I won't live with a family that don't let me have a room!"

"I see us footing your bills anywhere else," snapped Allie.

"Children-children-little-birds-in-a-nest-should-always-agree," chided Mother Parker absently. She was accounting for the floor space and thinking of placing the beds. She figured it out finally — all but the female relative, Rosy Trotter. Where they should park the relative was somewhat of a problem. In the newspaper office, perhaps, if David and Willie didn't have to sleep there.

"Want — drink," announced this relative.

"There ain't nothin' but a pump to drink from," declared

Pa Haskell contemptuously, as though drinking from a pump flavored of lese majesty — or possibly poison.

"Want — drink," insisted Rosy, all the same. I subsequently learned that she was "queer." I had my first demonstration when she finally got the water choked up high enough in the pump to spill into the rusty sink. There being no glass or cup on the premises, she applied her mouth beneath the spout, straddling her stout legs with hands upon her knees.

"Goods coming up to-night, Dave?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not. Allie says the truck didn't get started till long past noon. It's a twenty-mile haul and mostly uphill."

"Where will they sleep — your entangling alliances?"

He cringed and I was sorry. "Have to take some of them over to the Tavern, I suppose. I've been boardin' there — in exchange for advertisin'."

"How's the paper coming along?"

"Great! You ought to see how swell I've got everything fixed."

"I've seen. I went over everything while you met your folks. But are you making money?"

"I'll be making enough after I get the family settled so it doesn't cost so much to live. Me boardin' at the Tavern took that much off my advertisin' revenue and Allie's goin' back and forth two or three times a week cost money."

"Why didn't she live up here with you constantly?"

"She had to see her mother, of course. And now that Ma Parker's spent about all the money she got for her equity in the Adams Street house, it's costin' quite a lot to feed and clothe Ruthy and Willie. I never saw such a kid to rip his pants and wear out shoe leather."

"Why don't you make Ruth go to work and earn her own money?"

"She can't work and go to high school. And she's got to finish high school. It would break Ma Parker's heart if she didn't."

"Then break her heart and be done with it. You're under a nonsensical drag — with all these people living on you."

"I couldn't do that. They've been awful good to me in lots of ways — Ma Parker especially. After all, she let me have most of her money at one time or another."

"Yes, and you've probably paid it back five times over already — in the food she's eaten and the upkeep of her young ones." We were alone in a small hall bedroom at the back; David was seated on the window sill, his hands beneath his knees.

"Perhaps. Yet you know how relatives are. They don't look at loans that way. Unless you've got the money to pay back what you owe them all in one lump, the debt is never really settled."

CHAPTER X

DOUBLE TROUBLE

"Well," demanded Sam, entering the office Tuesday morning, "how did you find him?"

"He's acquired another relative."

"You mean his baby's born?"

"The baby I'm talking about never was born. It was chiseled." I told him of Rosy Trotter.

"William, there's something wrong with that kid's head."

"Well, the signs are not lacking that eventually he'll get sick of his bargain and balk. He referred to his dependents as 'the gang' half a dozen times while I was with him." And I went over my visit in detail.

"So he bedded down in his own newspaper office, eh? Gettin' married didn't fetch him much, did it?"

"If you'd seen all that I saw yesterday and last evening, you'd have committed a couple of murders."

"Why did he send for all those relatives? He promised Thorne he wouldn't ——"

"He had no choice in the matter. It was Allie's doing. She said 'she wouldn't have no family of hers split up the back by no business, no matter how promising.' She kept working on the fellow till he had to give in. You know that type of woman gets things."

"Well, he's got a peach of an interview coming with Big Jim. The man heard of the family exodus yesterday. He dropped in here last night to see if it was true. Says that if Dave hasn't got any sounder business sense than to load himself down with all those family incumbrances, let him take care of himself if he gets in hot water financially."

"That's too bad," I said gravely. "Because I can see Dave's angle. His wife's got a baby coming and naturally he isn't the sort to antagonize her in any such distressing condition. Besides, having a youngster of his own shapes up as something pretty fine indeed."

"Yet you think he'll eventually balk?"

"Something 'll happen. I size it up now as a matter of economics. That family's costing about twenty-five dollars more a week than David's making for himself. Poor kid — he's still wearing the suit we bought him the day after he landed here from Foxboro."

"Must have a lot of shine by this time."

"Lord, you can see to shave yourself in his coat tails!"

"He'll probably exhaust his working capital before he'll dispense with his wife's relations."

"Exactly. That'll mean a business failure. And solve nothing. That 'gang' won't see themselves responsible. They'll only see the boy. Their philosophy seems to be: *That man is financially successful who can make more than his family can spend.* He's got one of the finest little weekly properties in this state and is happy in building it. But I'll wager if he struggles trying to pay the bills of all that cantankerous human drag, he'll be back working for wages within two years."

"Bill, it's hard to understand people like that. I mean his family."

"Not when this world's divided in two classes of people, those who stand upright and those who lean. The pushers and the draggers — with ninety draggers for every ten pushers. And so long as the pushers are content to let the draggers climb on their backs — and drag — the latter will do it, never you fear!"

"I should think they'd have more independence, more pride, more stamina!"

"Nope. Those things take sprawl. Why waste energy exerting yourself *for* yourself, when there's someone around who'll do it for you?"

Sam continued grave, making aimless marks on his pad. "Bill, that girl may wreck that fellow in her ignorance; load him down with so *much* drag that he ruptures his ambition."

"Well, having married him, she naturally decides it's her privilege."

"With the proper wife at his shoulder, no drag but their baby, and the ability he's shown on the *Times*, that kid wouldn't remain here in the country two years. I've been reading some of his editorials. He's writing stuff that the big city dailies would buy for mighty good money."

"Well — it'll be an interesting proposition to watch, the outcome of this marriage."

"It'll be a tragedy to watch — darned clever lad will be wrecked right before our eyes."

The truth of the matter was, David subsequently worried more over his payments to Thorne than any of us suspected. Rarely a week went past that summer and autumn that I didn't drive up to Wickford and "look in" on him. I saw the inexorable overload slowing him up.

From the first day the family moved in, they did not like the harness-shop tenement and took care to impress it on him. Pa Haskell snored at night "like a lunatic with a shovel ripping shingles off a roof." His strangles were heard all over house and neighborhood. Mother Parker "couldn't get a wink of sleep"; she was short-tempered at the end of the day in consequence. The place was fearfully hot as the summer came on, and partly because of her disappointment at Dave's earning capacity, partly because of her approaching maternity, Allie's temper acquired the smoothness of a file. Willie cut up such antics and got into so much mischief on the premises that Joe Krable, the Dutch harness maker downstairs, was constantly at war with mother and sister.

David not only slept in the newspaper office each night but after a time took to omitting his meals, rather than go home and have the general caterwaul poured into his tired young ears. Or he slipped across to the combination bakery and lunch room and put weird, indigestible messes of dough and sugar into his stomach that left him distressed each late afternoon.

And through it all there was Lillian.

He was working at his desk with care-dulled brain one muggy July evening — the first summer — when he heard a step on the porch of the office and the slap of the light screen door. He glanced up with annoyance. He did not recognize his caller at first. She was taller than he had remembered the sobbing young woman he had taken home from the paper mill. Hatless, she wore her tawny hair parted back from her forehead and curled in a careless knot at the nape of her neck. Her figure was enveloped in an old brown cloak. She held it together in the front and was ominously

pale as her greenish eyes appraised him. She looked as though she might have been recently ill.

Rising from his desk, Dave came around the droplight and looked in her face. Then a great thrill of perturbation tore through him. Lillian in Wickford! What did she want?

"So! I've found you?" She said it as though she might have searched hemispheres for him. Yet she meant it whimsically.

Dave whetted his lips. "I — didn't know — you were in town."

"Well I am! And you're responsible," still mischievously.

"How am I responsible?"

She did not want to tell him candidly. So she said, "You know what you did to me. Ask me that!"

Yes, he knew what he had done to her. He had been instrumental in confining her for sixteen months in the unspeakable degradation of what he assumed to be a prison. On a hundred lonely nights it had heckled him. Supposing she went around the town and — talked?

"I know. I've always been sorry. Terribly sorry."

"Have you? Honestly?"

"Honest I have. I've been almost sick over it. How've you been, anyhow?"

"A lot of trouble you took to find out."

"I — couldn't. People mightn't understand."

"What do I care for people?"

"Shush! Don't say it so loud. You don't need to tell the town."

"I'll tell the town!"

"No, no. Please don't. It'd ruin me here. It'd ruin everything."

"What about me? What about my ruin — for which you were responsible?"

What answer could David make? This woman was his Nemesis. But his soul was sick within him that some idler outside might overhear and misinterpret; there was usually a group at the corner of the bridge.

"Well," she snapped, "— why don't you say something?"

"What is there — for me — to say?"

"I want to know what you're goin' to do. To help me. You owe it to me," she came out flatly at last.

"What *can* I do about it?"

"I want some help."

"What k-k-kind of help?"

"I don't care. Any kind. I'm most at the end of my rope." Her voice cackled, broke. The girl, in fact, was far more terrified, more distraught, more reckless, than showed at first glance on the surface. She wanted David — or rather, she wanted some more of his chivalry — of being received like a lady. It might have been a reaction from an all-winter illness; she might have evolved a plan for what she considered "justice."

"I'll turn out the lights and lock up," he suggested fearfully. "We'll go somewhere — a place where we can talk."

There was money in the cash drawer — twelve or fifteen dollars. Vaguely David felt he might require it, that somehow money would extricate him if she precipitated a dilemma. Men in the toils of Sybarites who have debauched monarchs have had similar hunches.

He pulled out the drop-light, scooped the bank notes from the drawer, got hat and coat and locked the door. For an instant he had a wild urge to bolt. Then it occurred to him that bolting would not silence Lillian's tongue. The girl must be completely placated; otherwise ruin. He knew Wickford and the moral code of its gossips.

He shambled beside the girl on the road leading out of the village on the west. Down past the Tavern, the garage, the cider mill, he moved with face averted, eyes downcast. Dull, hazy moonlight bathed village and valley. He was thankful the street lamps were extinguished in consequence. They quickly reached open farming country on the road that led toward Barre. Passing motorists took them for strolling lovers; when brilliant headlights met them, the boy pulled his hat brim down low on his face.

Out here in gray moonlight, along the sleeping countryside, houses far apart, night insects singing, hills like great black tents against the stars, status of man and woman was altered. Lill was no longer a town unfortunate. David ceased his rôle of the frightened adolescent. They were a man and a woman in the night. He might have been strolling with her so for days, for months, for years. After all, it wasn't much different than strolling with Allie.

It surprised David at first, this altered relation. It gave him boldness, confidence. He found he could talk to this

girl without terror. He made the discovery which many a man has learned to his chagrin when dealing with an irrational woman—it isn't the woman he fears, it is the unmerited chastisement of the social code which her sex and its aberrations may influence to his hurt.

"Now what's it all about?" he demanded. "And how can I really help you most?"

She didn't know, of course. She could not quite screw herself to demand money of him openly, crassly. She found that she too had committed a strategic error in transferring her grievance to the heart of lonely country spaces. She only knew she had a grievance—a grievance against the world. Somehow she conceived that David could help.

What she did not know—it was not his ostensible affluence for which she groped. It was he himself—Man. She wanted his sustaining sex, his moral strength, his chivalry again. Her soul cried for the presence of a worth-while mate. And through a social complex she could not comprehend, there was no mate. Not David at least, for whom she hungered.

"Have you got any money?" he asked her at length. He felt instinctively large and benevolent, again the providence.

She had no money. One of the mill women had given her a breakfast that morning. She was strong enough to attempt a twenty-mile walk from Paris to Wickford to get something from a man for nothing in return—but not strong enough to work. She was obsessed with the fear of another commitment if she lapsed openly from virtue.

She turned her ankle once on a stone and he caught her from falling. He was surprised he could do it—when he stopped to give it thought. Her arm was like any other woman's arm and much firmer than Allie's. She had a physical grace which Allie lacked. Steadying her while she remained a moment on one leg, rubbing the distressed ankle with both hands, the fellow had a distinct man-of-the-world feeling. Lill was a very wicked person—a very, *very* wicked person—the kind ministers scorched from pulpits and tearful mothers warned their sons to avoid. Dave was finding her just—a woman. He could steady her arm without his hand withering or his moral fiber disintegrating as though struck with fire from heaven.

They finally sat down on a little mound beneath a wild

apple tree a little way back from the road. Dave's back was against the tree. The girl sat sideways before him, nursing the wrenched ankle.

"Lillian," he asked, as he might have argued a delicate point with Allie, "can't you turn over a new leaf and make a better go of things? A girl as good-looking as you ought not to waste her life as you're wasting yours."

"Am I good-looking? I mean — do *you* think so?"

"Christmas! I think you're one of the swellest looking girls I've ever seen. And I've thought so from the first morning I ever set eyes on you in the lunch room. That is, when you don't let yourself get slack."

"I might turn over a new leaf — if I only had some one like you to show me how. That's just the trouble — I don't exactly know how."

"You can get a decent job ——"

"I can't get a decent job. Everybody knows me 'round about Paris. And the minute I go outside they ask for references. I know because I've tried."

"What happens if they ask for references?"

"They get my record — don't they? That I've been to Vergennes. Nobody wants a girl around who's been in any reformatory. And — you know how I came there."

Yes. David knew.

"I've just got to the end of my rope," the girl cried brokenly. "The very, very end." And she started to weep — big, convulsive sobs. She bent over Dave's knees to do it and instinctively he stroked her hair. In so doing — without disastrous results — he felt very old with the world; more the providence than ever.

"I better talk to my wife or my mother-in-law about you; Allie can help better because she's a woman."

But no, "talking her over" with Allie or Mrs. Parker was what Lillian positively did not want. What *did* she want? She could not say. But emphatically, it wasn't other women.

"Well," sighed the fellow at last, knowing he would come to it all along, "if you'll promise to say nothing about it and go off somewhere, I'll give you money."

Lill was sincere in her distress. She did not dry her eyes at once on his mention of money. The boy was disconcerted when seated beside him on the mound, slightly lower than himself, Lillian stole her right hand along his cordy arm

and gripped his wrist. It was an almost hysterical grasp. A half-drowned boy swimming over in Lake Hathaway had once grasped him so.

The moon rode higher. The country night deepened. Once an automobile stopped a short distance away and killed its engine while its driver tried to fix a short-circuited horn. They remained very quiet—as though they were fugitives. David breathed in relief when the car drove on.

He took the bills from his pocket at last and folded them into the girl's shapely fingers. Again the providence. He was following impulses no woman may understand—those instincts toward compassion, protection, charity for dependent womanhood simply because it is womanhood, that are virulent in certain types of males though completely lacking in others.

She accepted the money—without thanks. She tucked it away in her blouse, between her corset and her bosom. She did this artlessly. He was startled by the maturity of her breast as the moonlight revealed it.

"I got to be getting back," he said finally. She had returned to her drowning grip on his wrist. He disliked to throw it off, to wrest his arm away.

And yet after a time he did it. They started back toward the village. The girl walked painfully. But approaching the village of humankind once again, the subtle camaraderie began slipping, slipping. The spell of raw night and of nature released them. David's fright at being in propinquity with this creature returned; Lill lost her subconscious frailty of sex and became again the Hagar.

Approaching the office, however, the lad's heart leaped in worry to see a light burning in the place he had certainly left darkened. Who had lighted it—and why?

"You go ahead on up to the depot," he advised Lill hastily. "You can catch the night Flyer —"

"Awful rush to get shet of me, aren't you?"

"No, but—I can't have my business here ruined by—talk."

"All right. Yet, oh, how I wish I didn't have to come here on the sly!" To his tremendous relief she quickened her pace and went on ahead of him across the bridge and turned the corner by the bank.

Allie was in the office. She was standing hatless before the cash desk on the counter.

"What's the matter?" the husband demanded, when he saw her face.

"There was some money in this cash drawer when I went out to-night, twelve or fifteen dollars. I was going to pay Miss Hadley for Ma's new hat."

"I know. I'm sorry. I had to use it for — a bill."

"What bill?"

"It was ——" The lie did not come easy. He stopped.

And while he stopped, plainly as thumps on a coffin, came the swift, hard tread of returning feet across the near-by bridge. Straight up to the office door that tread continued. The screen door creaked as it opened.

"David Haskell! What do you think I can do on *fourteen dollars?*"

The boy's heart stopped. His blood turned to water. He wanted to turn about and could not. All he could do was raise eyes in cold horror and get the expression on the face of his wife. He did not turn his head toward the speaker. Instead, the speaker moved up within range of his vision.

"David," stammered Allie. He thought for a moment she would drop. "Who is — this — woman? What — does she mean?"

"It's Lill, Allie. Lill Whalen. She's — in an awful lot of trouble —"

"*You've given her money?*"

Apparently David had. But not enough.

Allie caught her breath. Then with a shrill, long-drawn blood-curdling "Oh-o-o-o-o-o!" she hid her face in both hands, stumbled around the end of the counter, pushed past her husband, walking on his feet. Brushing the Whalen woman, Allie reached the door. She crossed the veranda, went down the single step and off in the night.

"Now you've done it!" choked David.

Allie had not gone in the direction of her home — her relatives. She had fled westward, down past the Tavern, in the wrong direction!

CHAPTER XI

PADLOCKS ON WEDLOCK

"Who's that woman?" demanded Lillian.

"My wife, of course. Get out of here! She's gone in the wrong direction, and I've got to bring her back."

This could have but one meaning for Lill. The wife had probably gone after some one who would "do" something. Best for Lill to side-step until she was certain no jeopardy threatened for herself. She was about to withdraw when something large, vast and tubby loomed on the outer side of the light screen door. It was Rosy Trotter who had materialized from the center of the road. It was one of Rosy's little eccentricities, walking in the middle of the street. Hence she had crossed the near-by bridge without appreciable noise.

"Look after Miss Whalen," Dave ordered Rosy excitedly. "I've got to bring Allie back." And he ran to the walk.

Where had Allie fled? Fear chilled his heart afresh. Why had she run blindly westward on the street that led out of the village unless a sudden aberration was responsible? And in sudden aberrations, women in Allie's condition sometimes did desperate things. A sense of exasperated tenderness for Allie mixed with his alarm.

There were a hundred side paths, a thousand shadows, that might have absorbed the distraught woman's figure. But Dave got back as far as the garage with no clew to give him the wife's destination. In the black shadow before the door of the garage he noticed the ruddy spark of a cigarette. On closer inspection he saw the silhouettes of seated men.

"Did you see a woman runnin' down past here a few minutes ago?" he panted.

"Naw, we ain't seen no woman. Not runnin', anyhow."

Evidently Allie had not gone as far westward as the garage. The distraught young husband retraced his steps to the newspaper office. Why *did* this sort of thing have to happen just then—when he was worrying so much over getting together that payment for Jim? Darn women, anyhow! Confounded nuisances.

Rosy was alone in the office. Her little fried-egg hat was askew; she had a magazine on the counter before her and was tearing out beauty advertisements.

"Where's Lill Whalen?" It was a hectic, thankless business, keeping track of two obstreperous females.

"Dunno. She — went." Economy of speech was Rosy's strong point.

"Went where?"

"Off!"

"Did she *say* anything?"

"Yeah. You'd got her in — trouble!"

"She said that to you?"

"Naw. Mr. Kidder. I was only listenin'."

"*Mr. Kidder!*"

"And John Barley. They come in — notice — selectmen's meetin'."

"But why should she say anything to them?"

"They saw her cryin'. Asked her what ailed her. You better go home."

"But I've got to find Allie first. She's wanderin' around this village crazy somewhere."

"Allie's home. Ma Parker sent Willie — tell you come quick."

The wife must have circled back, or perhaps he had passed her down the west road in the dark. "What ails her?" he cried. His mind was on the sickening announcement that the two angular, narrow-minded, hard-boiled old selectmen had questioned Lillian.

"Needs her husband. Willie — kept on — fetch Doctor Bellows — baby!"

David got across the bridge. It was only a fifty-foot span yet it seemed half a mile. He cut from the bank diagonally across to the post office. It came to him he had given Lill Whalen all his ready money. He remembered he had but seven dollars in his bank account.

All the lamps were burning in the tenement over the harness shop. It was hot, stuffy, odorous with freshly ironed clothes that hung across the kitchen like a screen. The family had gathered tragically in the sitting-room. For once even Willie was behaving himself. A low moan came from the room on the left.

"She's had a shock," announced Ruthy in fright. "Doctor Bellows says the baby may come to-night!"

Pa Haskell considered it an occasion for levity. "Yes, sir. You may be a father," he bantered. "Let's hope it don't look like you — the baby!"

Once as a small boy David had swung on the tailboard of a moving grocery wagon. A woman with an umbrella had been met and the horse had bolted. For the next five minutes a terrorized small boy had hold of something he could not relinquish without great personal disaster. He had the same sensation now.

Mother Parker trundled suddenly out of the side room. She carried a basin. "We ought to have some ice," she announced.

"But there's no place to get ice in this little country village at this time of night!"

"We'd been able to get *plenty* ice if we'd stayed to Paris," Pa Haskell reminded them.

"Willie and Ruth — you get out of here," their mother ordered.

"Aw-w-we don't wanner!" wailed Willie. "I'm seventeen!" protested Ruthy.

"You *get* — the both of you!" And for the first time since David had known her, Mother Parker cuffed son and daughter soundly.

"Aw — where'll we go?" bawled Willie.

"Go out and walk the streets. The summer night won't hurt you —"

"Rosy's over in the *Times* office," declared David. "Go over and stay with her."

"I don't like Rosy. She threw chunks of stove wood at me yesterday —!"

"You *get*, I said!" And to make sure they got, the woman whacked Willie's rear quarters with the basin. "You go hunt ice!" she snapped at David. "You heard me before!"

There was no crooning in the Parker woman's voice now. She was boss of that camp and would remain so till her daughter became a mother.

"Is Doctor Bellows —"

"He's in there with Allie. I don't know what started all this but I mean to find out. Young man, I'll give you two minutes to start rustlin' ice!"

David dodged under the kitchen line of ironed clothes and shambled down the stairs. Mother Parker called after him, "Go over to Barley's store. He has ice for his soda. And get enough or don't come back."

Barley's store! The cantankerous old mossback who had queried Lillian within the half-hour! David no longer felt like a providence as he circled twice around the business section, trying to summon the courage to knock up some storekeeper besides old Barley. He felt like a fear-crazed errand boy. Yet Allie might be dying for want of ice. Frenziedly pacing, he rounded the bank corner to collide head-on against two men — Jethro Kidder and Johnathan Barley. The selectmen were still together.

"Hold on here, bub. 'Pears to me you're in a mighty queer rush, so close to midnight!"

"I'm after ice. Mr. Barley, have you got any ice?"

"What you want ice for?"

"Doctor Bellows wants it. For my wife! She's sick!"

"Over to the store I got some ice."

"Let me have it. I'll pay you anything!"

The selectmen exchanged glances. They were tall, emaciated men in collarless shirts and unbuttoned vests. "Well, come along," said Johnathan at length. "I'll see if it's melted."

It was several blocks down the street to Barley's store. They paced in silence a couple of moments. Then Jethro Kidder demanded, "Who was that female over to your office few minutes back?"

"You m-m-mean Rosy?"

"I mean a girl looks somethin' like your wife."

"I guess — you mean — Miss Whalen. She's — a *friend* of m-m-my wife's."

"Talked damned funny for a friend of your wife's. Had over some queer explanations about you payin' her enough or she knowin' the reason why. What you owe her for? What'd she mean?"

"She not entirely responsible. She's been after me before." This came out desperately.

"Been after you before? What for?"

It was Aztec cruelty, this inquisition. But David had not been born or raised in the community. These selectmen had not known his father, his grandfather, all the tribe of his

relatives. He was considered in the light of an intruder, an upstart, someone who'd moved into Wickford and started showing off. Too young to run a paper, anyhow. Jethro was likewise a town father, a good Baptist, a man of morals. He went on ruthlessly: "Somethin' queer about you chasin' out as you did, just as we come across the bridge. You better tell us the truth!"

"I g-g-got her into a t-t-t-terrible fix, down in Paris ——"

"*What's that?*" Jethro stopped short. His loose arms hung at his sides like an ape. They swung from his shoulders three or four seconds with the abrupt cessation of bodily motion.

"I can't tell you the whole story to-night. I got to fetch ice ——"

"Perhaps I don't want to hear it," returned Kidder sinisterly.

David could not go all the way down to Barley's store and be catechized so. He turned blindly and fled toward the bank.

"So *that's* how things stand!" Jethro exclaimed.

"Gawd!" gasped the merchant. "And him that young!"

Thereat the two moved toward the curbing and stood there in low-toned conversation for the ensuing hour. By the words of his own mouth the boy had condemned himself. And he was permitted to edit the newspaper which went into two thousand local moral homes!

The distraught young editor stumbled across the bridge, and into the newspaper office where Ruth and Rosy were in a heated discussion of the science of obstetrics with Willie listening, goggle-eyed. It had occurred to David that possibly there was ice in the refrigerator of the grocery store the other side of the *Times* building. He would have to break into the place through a cellar door, but he would explain matters to the one-armed grocer in the morning — if morning ever arrived.

A chunk of ice the size of a cigar box showed in the refrigerator when Dave had forced the basement door. He departed with it and got back "home."

"Is that the best you could do?" demanded Mother Parker. "What kind of a provider do you call yourself, anyhow?"

David implied that as a provider he left much to be desired but was in no temper to argue it that night. Old Zach had

stretched himself on Ma Parker's sofa-bed, and, despite the domestic turmoil, was deep in sleep with his mouth dropped open. David had no courage to enter the sick room. Allie did not want him, anyhow. Once or twice she so declared herself, hoping devoutly she would die. David went out and sat on the stairs.

He was exhausted. Yet it was cooler out on the stairs. And quiet. The moon was going down. He supported his head with fists at his temples, elbows on his knees.

What a lot of havoc he had caused! He had simply tried to get ahead, to provide for his dependents, to make them as reasonably happy as possible. But there were so many of them—they demanded so much—they never seemed to get his angle or the dragging weight of the strain. He bungled everything. The approaching payment date to Big Jim, with no money in sight to meet it, sickened him. The thought of losing the paper after the work he had put into it, the success he felt he had made of things till his "family" came to town, nearly crazed him.

He knew what would happen if Big Jim drove up to Wickford and asked to look over his books. The millman would see quickly enough there had been ample money made to make the payments—if David had not used it to meet the demands of his family. The boy remembered sadly that he spent less than two dollars a week on himself. How explain all this to Jim with the fat man holding the views he did toward dependents?

From time to time, as the night deepened and Dave turned the problem over, Mother Parker came into the kitchen above him and drew water from the talkative pump or tore cloths into strips with the ripping sounds of a small buzz saw starting through a tiny log and stopping as abruptly; he could see her shadow on the lighted windows. In the front sitting room, Pa Haskell snored like the grunts from a pig. But those little cries of Allie's were the noises that sapped his mettle.

Suppose Allie died! Would he be obligated to go on supporting Mother Parker and raising Ruth and Willie? He wondered if there was a law covering such exigencies? And if he ever married again, would his second wife stand for having Pa Haskell live with them as Allie had done? Probably not.

Which meant he could never marry again — the Little Toy Lady, for instance — until Pa Haskell was as the grass that withereth and is cut down and cast in the furnace.

So he came to the conclusion it would be just as well if Allie did not die that night. Somehow he felt no qualm of broken despair at the proposition of Allie's departing this vale of tears. If it hadn't been for Pa Haskell, he could have thought of Allie's passing with relief. That is, providing there were no law compelling him to go on supporting Mother Parker and Ruth and Willie.

He never knew when he fell asleep. He only knew that he was tired — terribly, agonizingly tired. He leaned his head and shoulder against the railing and let his thoughts fuse into a chaotic phantasmagoria of Rosy, Ruth, Willie, Allie, Lillian.

Then someone was shaking him vigorously. He was painfully stiffened. The side yard and street before him were gray.

"It's over," announced a familiar voice, Mother Parker's.

"What's over?" Something had diluted the sharp, black shadows of night. The hill that rose behind the millinery shop over the way was swathed in clammy mist. His wits were stupid.

"She's asleep at last. You can come in now. It's a mercy you haven't caught your death of cold or rolled down the stairs and broken your neck."

He considered a moment.

"You ought to be proud. You're the father of twins. Two of the finest baby girls that ever came down from heaven!"

Again he considered. "Girls?" he whispered. "*Two* of them?"

"You're not quite awake! Don't try to get up till you're sure of yourself. Mercy, we can't have you falling down-stairs *now*! You've got to live to raise your new family!"

CHAPTER XII

SANDED BEARINGS

Few summers in Vermont were ever as hot as was that following summer of 1911. The Green Mountain heights were cool, but the valley towns baked in sear, dead heat. A drought in our section of the state, beginning in mid-June, lasted till early August. Corn died in the fields; streams dried up; the hay crop failed. In the towns, heat prostrations were of daily occurrence. We had one in our office. Old John Burley, make-up man, dropped on his way home to lunch and never got over the shock.

In this emergency I was taking his place between the imposing stones one afternoon when Sam Hod came out from the office and rolled up his sleeves.

"There's something wrong up to Wickford, Bill. I want you to go up and learn what it is."

"There's a lot wrong up in Wickford, if David's what you mean. It's been wrong since a year ago May, when his family ——"

"I don't mean his family; I mean *The Times*. Jim Thorne's out front. He's going up in his car. He wants a practical newspaperman along."

"What for?"

"He's going to look into Dave's accounts. The boy's made money, yet is up to his neck in debt. He only had about fifty dollars to offer Big Jim the first of July — scarcely covered his interest. And during the year his business has fallen off ruinously. He isn't carrying half the local advertising he had before his twins were born. Jim intends to get at the truth."

I turned the forms over to Sam, washed my hands and found coat and hat. Thorne's big maroon-colored Maxon waited out front. We lighted cigars and headed from Paris at a quarter past three in the afternoon.

"So it's the third degree you're going to give Dave?" I observed, as we rumbled eastward over the Green River

bridge and across "the flats." It was necessary to go over Cobb Hill to Millville and turn northward for Wickford.

"Some mighty queer stories have drifted down about the shines he's cuttin'. I'm goin' to know where my money sets." The fat man was surly. His wife's anemia had reached the stage where she now spent her days in bed.

"You've heard something new?"

"I've got it indirectly that somehow he's run afoul of the town. His paper's losin' ads in gobs. He was two days' late gettin' printed last week. He wrote me a letter askin' me to loan him a hundred to meet back wages."

"So bad as that?"

Our big touring car took the hills and hollows with the smoothness of an airplane. We hurtled through fragrant pine woodlands and crossed long tracts of sear yellow meadows. Frail country bridges trembled beneath our weight. Now and then the car's right side brushed the tips of sun-dried sumach and raspberry, as we turned out for oncoming rigs. The roadway sand hung heavy in the breathless air; we got it in our eyes and it gritted in our teeth.

About eight miles north of Millville, three cars in a row waited for us to pass through a particularly narrow strip of road. The dust cloud was distressing — like pulverized talc. As we churned slowly past, our chauffeur blinded, I glanced at the halted machines. At once I frowned sharply. The driver of the middle car looked like the fellow we were going to interview.

It was improbable, of course. Someone who resembled him, doubtless. And yet, as we completed the twenty miles of our journey in the next fifty minutes, the presentiment stayed that it *had* been David.

We turned the corner by the savings bank, crossed the bridge and drew up before the newspaper's door. Rosy Trotter was the only person inside. She had a swatter and was killing flies, regardless of the fact that a hole in the screen's lower half was big enough to admit a dog.

"Ain't — here," the woman announced, whacking a fly that lighted on my shoulder without so much as a by-your-leave.

"Well, where is he?" stormed Jim Thorne.

"Gone. Paris!" And Rosy went on swatting flies.

"But we've just come from Paris."

Ruth appeared around the corner of the door. I was surprised to see her clothed in a black cambric apron, fingers grimy with type dust. "Dave's been acting sort of queer all day," she announced. "He got a letter in last night's mail. It upset him, funny-like."

"That's *it*," announced Rosy, pushing a sheet of cheap paper along the counter with the flat of the swatter. A fly lighted near it as Big Jim reached out and she almost mashed his fingers. "Found it — floor."

There was no doubt it had been on the floor. It was a sheaf from a calendar — of the previous month — big figures on one side, scrawl of writing on the other. The figured side was scratched and smutted. The side with the writing bore the imprint of a couple of boot heels. I looked over Jim's shoulder.

DERE DAVID —

Pleeze come to see me if it is the last thing you do as I am at barbers camp and dying I gess dont fale to come as it is a mater of life and death but pleeze tell no one. I am in Paris so pleeze come aloan.

LW

"L-W!" roared Jim. "Who's L-W?"

I knew, but waited to learn if either of the girls were aware. They shrugged their shoulders. Rosy whacked a fly on the desk and upset an ink bottle.

"Leave off with that confounded swattin'!" snapped Jim. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"Rosy — bookkeeper. Who are you?"

"I'm Jim Thorne, by gad! It's my money bought this newspaper!"

"No good," responded Rosy. "Don't make enough money. Bankrupt."

"That's just what I'm here to find out. If you're the bookkeeper, trot out the books — I want to know where it's gone."

"Not kept — up to date. Stopped entries till he paid my wages." And regardless of Jim's admonition, Rosy scanned the vicinity for flies.

"So he owes you money; does he?"

"He owes everybody money!" Ruthy announced. "Old man Higgins quit two weeks back. Rutherford went yester-

day. Nobody's working but me and Sparrow. I'm only here because Ma makes me."

Willie fell into the place at this point. He had two boys with him. They thumped ball clubs down on the floor.

"Young man," commanded Jim, "do you know where David Haskell's gone?"

"Yeah. Borrowed Lem Johnson's Ford and went to Paris. I tried to make him lug me, too, but he got over the hill afore I could catch him."

"Where's his wife — your sister?"

"Home," answered Willie.

"She's sick," explained Ruth. "She's sick all the time since she had the twins. She goes to the doctor's twice a week."

Rosy had climbed on the counter while this intercourse was in progress. She was trying to reach for flies on the ceiling. It groaned beneath her tonnage — that counter. She had ankles like billets of stove wood, wrapped in twisted white stockings.

An Airedale dog came scraping through the torn screen door while Jim and I surveyed each other.

"It's evident," commented the millionaire wryly, "this office is run on somewhat elementary business principles."

Mentally I contrasted what I saw before me now — and in the next few minutes as we went over the plant — with the clean, neat, well-ordered establishment I had entered a year ago Decoration Day. The imposing stones were now choked with type awaiting distribution. Presses were unwashed; the ink was dried on rollers ruinously; floors looked as though they had not been swept for weeks.

"Do you know enough about the newspaper business to make head and tail of things in this condition?" Jim demanded.

"It would be a job for an accountant. Issue by issue the papers would have to be checked, the subscription list gone over —"

"Hell!" snarled Jim. "If I'd suspected this state of affairs I'd been up here months ago."

"Months ago," said I, "he wasn't running his business this way. I know for I was here."

"Then what's happened?"

"I'd say a breakdown in morale."

"From too much family?"

I nodded.

"Well, we'll soon fix that. This time I'll *starve* 'em into submission. If he can't get shet of them any other way, I'll foreclose and take away his business. Then where'll they be?"

"I'm afraid, Jim, it'll be Dave alone who will suffer. The family will blame it on him and he'll have to take up the struggle elsewhere."

"By the Lord Harry!—there must be *some* way to save the kid from all these sanded bearings."

"Getting him a new wife perhaps might do it. But first make sure she's an orphan!"

We were out in the back room alone, surveying the general dilapidation. On the near-by imposing stone were two or three letters weighted down with old half-tones. The top one came from the linotype company's Boston office. They gave Dave thirty days to resume payments on his machine or they would remove it from his premises.

"I'm goin' out in this town and make a few inquiries," Jim announced. "You try and josh that female imbecile into showing you the bills—whether they're entered on the books or not. Make a list of 'em so we can see how much the young colt owes. Get together any other data you can. I'm ripe to slaughter the whole gummy gang."

Roughly I tried to comply with Jim's order. I coaxed and wheedled Rosy into a better humor by paying her the eight dollars and sixty cents I discovered Dave owed her—or she considered Dave owed her—out of my wallet. She began to rake out bills.

There were grocery bills from every store in town. There were bills for clothing, dresses, hats. I found a seventy-dollar doctor's bill and a bill from the optician's for fixing old Zach's pumpkin watch. The most exasperating of the lot was some sort of respirator the latter had ordered from Chicago as a remedy for asthma; he had kept the machine beyond the trial limit and the account had been due for eight or ten weeks. It amounted to \$112.

I grew heartsick as I compiled the items on two sheets of paper—one sheet for the business obligations, another for the family's. Totalling them finally, I discovered the

domestic list topped the business column by something like two hundred dollars.

I saw well enough what had happened. Not only had his family bled him for money as fast as it appeared in the mails but had opened charge accounts at every store carrying ads in the paper. There had been no budgeting or discretion in these obligations. The fact that debts "could be taken out in advertising" ran those advertising credits to absurd proportions and removed all brakes from the family purchasing. It was in the same class with getting goods for nothing.

I was discouraged and disgusted when I had compiled my lists. I was further advised by Rosy that she guessed there were a lot more bills around somewheres, but that Allie often came over and tore them up so Dave wouldn't worry and "put up a hollar."

"But hasn't he made any attempt to halt this crazy charging by going to the merchants themselves and prohibiting more buying?" I demanded.

"Tried it," responded Rosy laconically. "Ma Parker got turned down—twice—insulted, Allie says—had a fine fight—— He stayed away all night."

I estimated that with charge accounts and milking of the subscription list for small money, the family was costing David from seventy-five to a hundred dollars a week. I found several pathetic slips of paper in Dave's roll-top where he had been trying to figure out a budget.

It couldn't go on. I was sadly agreeing with Big Jim that they ought to be starved into control, when the millionaire returned. His face was white.

"William," he said tragically, "there's the dirtiest scandal loose in this town a man ever heard. The boy's under boycott."

"Scandal? *Boycott?*"

"Talked with the local auctioneer. Man named Kidder. He was sure primed to talk. He gave me a mouthful. *Dave's keepin' a woman!*"

"Fiddlesticks! Are you so gullible—or unable to read a boy's character?"

"William, where's that paper that was covered with boot-heels? What initials were signed to that writin'?"

"L-W," I declared. "Lill Whalen, they stand for."

"That's it. Whalen. Lill Whalen."

"You mean — there's a scandal here about Lillian?"

"Kidder claimed he got the story from the girl herself. He says later Dave confirmed it. She's been seen here on and off, mostly at night. They've tried to arrest her but somehow she's dodged 'em."

"I don't believe it!"

"Believe it or not, that's why the paper's losing business. The town won't stand for that sort of thing. David's almost *persona non grata* — the damned young idiot! How could he ever expect to get away with ——"

"David hasn't tried to get away with anything. I'd stake my life he's as clean as a hound's tooth."

"Well, where is he? Why's he gone to Paris?"

"That I can't tell you, except for the letter."

"Did you get your data? How was it?"

"Pitiful. I figure out that with what's due on his folder and linotype, he's owing close to eight thousand dollars."

It took a minute for Jim to get this. "You mean two thousand dollars above my loan?"

"With your loan he owes fourteen thousand."

"Gawd!"

"Well, nothing loses money quicker than a newspaper, when the balance lies on the wrong side the books."

"He's bankrupt! Hopelessly bankrupt!"

Rosy, who had gone out during my figuring, now came waddling into the office. It was sunset by this time; she had an armful of newspaper mail — I knew by the familiar wrappers on exchanges. Down on the counter she dumped it and sorted out the letters. There were several pink return envelopes with the name and address of the paper printed across the front. These she slit open. Almost invariably they held checks — frequently a two-dollar note.

"What's them?" asked Big Jim.

"Subscriptions," she answered.

"What you doin', puttin' them bank notes in your skirt?"

"I got to, ain't I?" she demanded. "Dave ain't here — and the family's got to have somethin' for supper!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE FORGOTTEN

I had been correct. It *was* David I had noted in one of those stalled automobiles that had waited for us to pass. The lad told me later he recalled waiting for that right of way but had not recognized the Maxon's occupants.

He wondered what Lillian could be doing at Barber's Camp. The place was a series of rough-hewn cottages four miles down the river on the opposite shore from Paris. The fact that she had asked him to tell no one implied she was there in stealth. The least he could do was make the trip and help her—if only to get the damnable incident off his ultra-sensitive conscience. He succumbed.

Approaching Paris, he did not cross the Green River bridge. He took the fork to the south that led around the lower edge of "the flats," got into the river road that went down toward Prattsville and bumped and slurred over four miles of the roughest, stoniest highway in the Green River valley. Bushes brushed the ramshackle little Ford; some of them cut him in the cheek. Once he met a farmer's buggy driven by a lanky, barefoot girl and had to back up several hundred feet to find a clearing that permitted it to pass. It was nearly five o'clock when he left the Prattsville back-road and turned in between some bars toward Barber's. A private track—a series of ruts—along the northern end of a pasture led over toward the river's edge and some boarded cottages amid a grove of lofty pines. No signs of life were anywhere about. One cottage looked as deserted as the other. He stopped his engine.

He felt frightened as he stumbled afoot toward the pine-box structures. He stopped and listened for possible sound of a voice. All was quiet but for summer wind in the lofty pine boughs; the gentle splashing of river water amid the stumps and pebbles down at the foot of the embankment. A chipmunk scuttled from a rough veranda; a hedgehog loped into the brush where the clearing ended in woods.

Cabin by cabin he went about, trying doors or windows, three of them without results. Then he saw a window un-

boarded on a fourth, the shutter turned back against the wall. He crept softly toward this house.

"Lillian!" he called. "Lill Whalen!"

He heard an answer then. It was a long harangue in a rasping monotone. Were other people there before him? Had she been discovered? Closer he crept and listened.

The solitary occupant was semi-delirious.

He pushed the door wide open and peered in fearfully. It was a plain-boarded room with bunks built into the corners. Tables, chairs, closets were of the same rough timbers but new and sweet smelling. The heat was stifling. And on one of the lower bunks he saw — Lill Whalen.

Amid a mess of tousled blankets she was lying. A pillow was off on the floor. Clothing half torn from her upper body, hair completely down and strangling her neck and shoulders, she rolled her head from side to side and when he approached, looked up like the suffering animal she was, greenish eyes glazed with agony.

She seemed to recognize him, however.

If she had ever been a gamin of the small-town gutter, a girl of the mill tenements, that rôle had dropped away for the moment. Her haggard cheeks gave her features a character that had not been there hitherto; her pain brought a febrile flush to her skin that made her pitifully beautiful.

"I knew you'd come," she told him brokenly. Then she tried to whet her lips. Collecting her vitality she lifted a hand. "You've come — to carry me — down to the river. It's cool down there. I can drink — all the water I want."

He looked around for water. He recalled he had stumbled in a small spring behind one of the cottages in searching for this girl. A bucket stood bottom up on the back of a rusted camp stove. He caught it up, sped forth and filled it.

He used his handkerchief to bathe her forehead. He tried to raise her so she might drink. They spilled the liquid over the mattress.

"You've got to have a doctor," he announced.

"No, no. Just sit by me. Just hold my hand tight. It'll make — it easier — " The last word ended in a little scream of pain.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"Matter? Don't you know?"

The boy was suddenly sick with panic. The ride in the terrific heat — the strain — now this!

She did not finish her assertion. She cried out wildly — cries such as Alice had made the night of the birth of the twins. She clutched his wrist so the arteries swelled. David could scarcely endure the ovenlike temperature.

The sight of the exposed parts of her body did not embarrass him; only appealed to his toleration, understanding, compassion. She was a stricken human creature, helpless, friendless. Again he was the providence. The rôle came easy — easier than it had ever come before.

"You've *got* to have a doctor," he told her again — in one of her moments of lucidity. "And you ought to have a nurse. You ought to be taken to the hospital."

"No, no!" she screamed at that. "Just sit here beside me. Promise you'll never, never leave me. Promise, promise!"

The chipmunk dared the veranda once more, posed for an instant on the threshold. David moved in his bewilderment and it whisked away, only to reappear later on the sill of the opened window. A jay screeched. From across the river came the tooting of the six o'clock train into Paris. Otherwise quiet, the sickish odor of the sweet pine boards, the labored breathing of the girl.

She relaxed her hand after a time and appeared to sleep. David had to do something. Whether she protested or not, he had to bring aid. He waited till she lay quiet once more. Then he stole from the cabin.

Once on the clearing he broke into a run. A root tripped him but he reached his machine. Backing it around, its chassis striking pasture boulders, he headed it once more toward the Plattsville highroad.

He did not realize how weak and sick he was himself till he finally completed that awful four miles of stones and water ruts that brought him down once more out on "the flats." It came to him that he had not eaten since morning — and then but two doughnuts and a cup of coffee. His shoulder blades ached with his grip on the wheel; it seemed the machine would rack him in pieces.

Across the Green River bridge it rumbled and came down East Main Street. It was sunset now. He avoided gamboling children as by a miracle, kept clear of traffic, turned into Maple Street and up to the house of the only physician

with whom he was acquainted — venerable Doctor Johnson.

"He ain't home yet," the doctor's wife announced. "I think you could find him up to Thorne's — if you got an ottermobile. He's up there pretty frequent, lately. Mis' Thorne's real poorly."

David recalled that Lill Whalen needed a nurse — another woman. Whom could he ask that he knew? Why not Carrie — if Mrs. Thorne would spare her? He did not stop to turn the automobile. He kept on up Maple Street and cut through Hawley Avenue. That brought him to Putney Street. He headed back into Main and thence up Preston Hill.

His exhausted heart gave a thump of relief when he beheld the physician's little roadster parked on the Thorne Hedge driveway. He stopped his own car and went up the steps. He had to clutch on the door case to keep from swaying when he rang the bell. It was answered by Mrs. Fawcett.

"Carrie — ask Carrie — and Doctor Johnson — come with me — woman dying — please hurry!"

The Little Toy Lady was at the moment coming down the inside stairs. Johnson was leaving. She crossed the reception hall and gave a frightened cry.

"Why, it's David! What's the matter, David? You're ill!"

"Guess it's the heat. It's sort of — got me! Sick woman! You and Doctor ——"

"Steady, boy, steady!" The physician's voice came queerly.

The Little Toy Lady was not at a loss. She had looked upon a fellow twenty pounds lighter than when she had seen him last; face sunken, eyes protruding, lips caked with dust, a smear of machine grease across his forehead. On his cheeks, however, were two red spots — bright vermilion disks — that fanned as she looked.

"Lill Whalen dying — Barber's cottage —" The figures of physician and girl, Mrs. Fawcett, the rich, cool hallway with the stairs beyond — these commenced to tilt and rock. "Come — quick," he added. "It's — the — heat!"

"Barber's Cottage!" cried Johnson. "You mean — over the river?"

David nodded. "Been there — sent for me — hurry! — Goin' crazy!"

"Take care of him, Carrie. Grab a wrap, Mrs. Fawcett. I don't understand it — yet — but some hell's afoot. You come along with me."

"No, no. I'm — all right," David protested. "My car — Lem Johnson's Ford — borrowed it — drive you back —"

"This boy's collapsing, Carrie. Make him go inside. Mrs. Fawcett, get your wraps. Anything, d' ye hear me? A shawl. A coat. Wraps! What's the matter with you?"

"Come in and rest, David." The girl put her arm about the boy's shoulders. "It *is* the heat. The Doctor and Mrs. Fawcett will attend to — whoever it is. I'll get you something cool to drink."

David gave up because he had to give up. The ache of that aggravating wheel would not go from between his shoulders. They burned like fire. His head felt buoyant. His knees buckled inward.

He managed the step to the hallway. Then he slipped rakishly on the smooth waxed flooring. But Carrie sustained him. Big swellings seemed inflated to bursting behind his ears. He groped for the divan. He was nearer to it than he had supposed and sprawled across it. Carrie called shrilly for the cook. They were helping David upstairs as Johnson and the dumfounded Mrs. Fawcett went pummeling down the driveway.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN FALLS THE COLISEUM

It was nearing nine o'clock when Jim and I came back over the Green River bridge, crossed the tracks by the Process Works, and the Maxon's powerful head lamps were dimmed for the East Main Street traffic.

We had stopped for supper at the Tavern in Wickford. Later we had visited Allie and her mother — with no better results than Jim's intrusion at The Ark in Paris. Jim wanted to see Sam that night and the three of us decide what should be done with the Wickford newspaper and David specifically. The lights were burning in the *Telegraph* office. The Maxon was halted across the street and the chauffeur instructed to wait. We found Sam inside. He recognized Jim.

"Been home?" he demanded.

"No. Why? Fanny isn't ——"

"No. It's David. He's up there — sick! Dam' sick!"

"You mean *my* house?"

"Your house. Yes! All kinds of excitement in town to-night. First off, David comes poppin' into the place in somebody's Ford. Brings a wild story about Lill bein' sick down to Barber's camp ——"

"Was she?"

"She was! Somehow David happened down there and learned it. Lost his hat on the Plattsville road and the hot sun got him. By the time he reached Vermont Avenue, he was cuckoo ——"

"He went up to Thorn Hedge?"

"After Johnson. And crumpled. Your wife ordered him put to bed and sent for Doc Gardner. Carrie's nursin' him. Understand it's more'n sunstroke. Complete nervous breakdown."

"I should think it might be, after what we've learned up to Wickford. What about the girl?"

"Johnson and Mrs. Fawcett made the trip to Barber's. Child dead — mother vanished."

"Vanished!"

"Bunch of men have been huntin' her ever since Johnson drove back. Some think she's thrown herself in the river."

Jim's mouth was puckered grimly; again it resembled a button. "Gimme that 'phone," he requested.

Sam pushed the 'phone over. Jim called Doctor Gardner.

Gardner possessed that throaty voice that rasps distinctly over a telephone. From where I sat I could hear his replies:

"Hanged if I know yet. He's a pretty sick fellow. Got a high fever and running a temperature. First I called it sunstroke but it was long toward sunset when he lost his hat. Then I thought it was nervous collapse."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Don't know yet. Your wife said no matter what it was, he was to stay there. I agree with her — for the present. I'm going up again as soon as I close my office. Listen, Jim. That kid's married, isn't he?"

"I'll say he's married."

"Thought so. Well, keep his wife and family away from him. If his folks show up, they'll make him worse."

"Have you arranged for a nurse?"

"That little Flynt girl is nurse enough. Never blinked an eye all the time I was up there. Followed orders and took instructions like a veteran."

"How long do you think he'll be sick?"

"Maybe for weeks. Let's hope it's only breakdown."

Jim rang off and looked at us blankly. "Well," he said, "— I suppose that's that!"

We sat a long moment in silence. "Lord," I cried, "— won't there be a sweet caterwaul in Wickford when the family learns what's happened!"

"To thunder with the family," growled the fat man, tearing the tip of a fresh Havana off savagely. "I'm thinking about the boy — and my investment. A paper's a paper. It's got to come out, rain or shine, sink or swim, survive or perish."

"How bad did you find things?" Sam demanded.

"As bad as they could be," said I. And I gave him salient details.

Sam tapped his teeth with his pipestem. "Tell you what we'll do, Jim — seein' Dave's a sort of mutual prodigy. I'll take the Wickford paper off your hands with a lease and straighten it out till we find if the boy's ever goin' to be able to run it without his drag."

Still, we did not break up at once, not even when this had been agreed upon. Jim arose with a sigh and paced the office.

"I didn't suppose David could do it!"

"Do what?"

"Get a girl in trouble — at least *that* kind of girl."

"My God, Jim — you don't suppose for a moment David was father to —?"

"Sent for him, didn't she?"

"You're wrong, Jim," Sam snapped angrily. "Ben Williams' oldest boy has confessed. Broke down completely when he learned the girl had drowned herself. His mother's half crazy."

"Then why in thunder did David bolt to her assistance?"

"Oh," returned Sam, "he's that much of a fool!"

PART THREE
GET OFF MY BACK!

CHAPTER I

TIME PASSES

A thousand times each year — which specifically apportioned is three and one third times each working day — Mrs. Kathlyn Parker thanked the Almighty that He had been considerate enough to allot her but one remaining child of the female persuasion. For Ruthy at twenty-one was still nonclassifiable. At least Mrs. Parker had no precedents, personal standards or filing systems of proven merit with which to classify her. Ruthy needed perspective to be classified correctly and her mother did not have perspective.

Ruthy — unlike Allie — all through girlhood had cared little for home duties such as working tidies, playing with paper dolls, or reading the Alcott books. Ruthy wanted thrill and high light. So she washed dishes, ironed clothes and suffered piano lessons under duress. Then at the first relaxation in parental vigilance she was out of the house and away with a male. As she grew older these males found it to their advantage to agree with Ruthy that she was treated "cruel" and to make it unanimous that in these latter days, parents are superfluous on general principle.

Mrs. Parker felt that a maiden sister Agatha had been lamentably responsible for a majority of Ruthy's precocities. Aunt Agatha, deceased, had been the frayed tassel on a never-happened romance — one of those softish specimens who simper over births, cry over weddings and rarely miss funerals. Before Ruthy was eight, she had taken the little girl upon her lap and made her confess the identity of her "feller" and how many times the little boy across the street had kissed her without her mother knowing, and asked whether, when she grew up, she was going to marry a tall, dark man who loved her for herself alone or a cold, blond brute who could furnish her with a coach-and-four and rode to hounds? Ruthy could not possibly know the meaning of a coach-and-four or subscribe to a riding to hounds but it had gradually dawned on the child that there must be

something to this "feller" business and thenceforth adolescence was devoted to spicy investigation.

The year in Wickford when she was seventeen had been the "till death do us part" correspondence stage; at eighteen, when the family moved back to The Ark in Paris, she was a small-town Calypso ever scanning the Ionian Isles — amid virile Vermont mountains — for new Greeks to lure to jelly-bean heart-smash. Now at twenty-one, with David and Allie "separated," David working down in Springfield "on nothing like the money he once made in Wickford," Mother Parker keeping house for Pa Haskell — who was getting increasingly infirm and irascible with idleness as he aged — Willie staying at school under protest and working in the Paris Garage on Saturdays, the twins, Mabel and Mildred, in their fifth year — Ruthy fancied herself a trifle jaded with it all and face to face with the fatiguing presentiment that advancing maturity meant nothing beyond more subtle technique.

Work she would not, unless she were forced to it. There had been a season during the nine weeks of David's illness at Thorn Hedge when the family had been forced to exert themselves or starve, that she had clerked in the Bon Ton millinery. But as soon as Dave got around again, spent a blighting year in Jim Thorne's mill and then landed that position down in Springfield, Ruthy had permanently come to the conclusion that she was too beautiful and fragile to spoil herself with manual labor and, like her older sister, had grown to appreciate the personal profit accruing from "spells."

She worried a lot about the war that had broken out in Europe. If America became involved it might take hundreds of thousands of virile young males among whom Ruthy would otherwise have unbridled license of selection. Then came a night in the year of grace, 1915, when it dawned upon Miss Ruth Frances Parker with blasting realization that continued residence in Paris meant an aborted life and if she were ever to secure a husband worthy her assets she had better be getting some gimp into herself, journey to fields afar and find him before the Germans killed off most of her available material. She came home one night and precipitated a tornado of altercation by announcing that

with the coming week she was transferring her residence to Springfield, Massachusetts.

"If I can't do any better, I can at least go down and keep house for David," she declaimed to Allie. "Lord knows he's never had a house kept for him that wasn't cluttered up with sponging relatives — and I'm a man's woman anyhow, and know how to trim men so they like it, while you're only a woman's woman and so damned messed up with drooly brats you don't know a safety razor from a butcher knife and think a French briar is some sort of rose bush!" Ruthy had grown into increasing utilization of the adjective "damn" since the abolition of hell by modern theology. She considered it smart.

David was in no wise apprised of her coming. Emerging from the office of the Springfield paper, where he was gradually working into the rôle of directing genius of the Sunday feature section, he was startled the next afternoon to have a dainty, willowy, beribboned young thing with raven-black tresses beneath a floppy Panama hat run up to him with a delighted little shriek and kiss him squarely in the eye.

Ruthy had not meant to kiss David in the eye but the man had given a startled jump. Kissing David in the eye — or anywhere else — was something Ruthy had never done in her life. But she was out in the wide, cruel world now and a trifle nervous at the city's congestion. Furthermore, as she expected to be supported by David for seasons indefinite — in return for housekeeping favors to be rendered — it was only astute that she show herself affable, ebullient, sisterly, affectionate.

"Where on earth — what — my Lord! — Ruth Parker, what are you doin' down here in Springfield?"

"I've come down to live with you, David Haskell. Paris and I have parted forever."

David took mental note that Ruthy's skirts had lengthened, that her features were matured, that she was no longer a child but a dangerously pretty young woman. Her eyes were cherry black — as black as her hair. Shoulders, bust and arms were rounding out. She had a free and easy manner of carrying herself as open to misinterpretation as it was reckless. She wore a white organdie frock with dainty

pink flowers, silk stockings, patent leather pumps. She likewise carried a pongee parasol.

Ruthy looked at David and beheld a thin-faced, tired-eyed fellow, twenty-seven years aged but looking thirty-five. He wore a rumpled gray suit, the coat of which he carried over an arm—and held his straw hat in his hand. His beard had long since come through in little ragged patches and shaving had roughened his skin. There were tiny lines in the corners of his eyes and still more lines down the sides of his mouth. The Moving Finger was writing deeply on those features. Writing deeply and writing much!

"You've come down to *what?*"

"Live with you. Keep house for you—till I get a home of my own!"

"But you can't keep house for me, granted I wanted you."

"I'd like to know why not?"

"You're no relative of mine. We'd be arrested!"

"No relative of yours? I'm your *sister-in-law!*"

"That's not a blood relative. We'd get in trouble quicker than——"

"But what for?"

"Cohabitation."

"What's cohabitation?"

He explained—surprised by her lack of sophistication.

"You mean there's some sort of law against it?"

"Of course there's a law against it—a darned ugly law against it."

Ruthy debated this. She had always assumed such relations to be largely a personal defiance of social conventions—wholly up to the parties involved—and the thickness of their hides to stand community ostracism.

"I see. Then if there's people around it's quite all right?"

"In certain cases it might be."

"That's easy to fix. We can always get Willie. He's dying to get out of Paris, anyhow. He'd come to Springfield so quick you'd be dizzy."

There was not the slightest doubt that if Willie came to Springfield it would immediately cause dizziness. "But I don't want Willie," the man said savagely. They had been jostled along during this intercourse and were now moving side by side up Main Street. Ruthy was petulant. She finally demanded:

"Yet if we don't say anything to anybody, who's going to know we're not a regular brother and sister? We could even be known as husband and wife. It wouldn't be anybody's business."

"It's out of the question! Besides, I don't want to start housekeeping again. I had my nose rubbed in housekeeping with The Family."

"You could live cheaper," argued Ruthy. Her voice held panic. It had not occurred to her that David might not accept her. She wondered what would become of her. She had a dollar and fifty-two cents in her pocketbook; not enough for a return to Paris.

"I'm satisfied with living as I am. Anyhow, it's quiet and I can come and go as I please."

"Where are you living?"

"At a rooming house in Vernon Street."

"A rooming house isn't a home."

"I never expect to have a home. Not a regular home. I've bungled things too sweetly to ever have a home."

"You don't want me!" cried Ruth. "And I'm younger than Allie and a damned sight prettier."

Both assertions were substantially correct but how could the fellow openly concur? He compromised, "Did you come down here without any luggage?"

"I had my trunk checked. It's up to the station."

"You brought a trunk?"

"I brought everything I owned. I said I was done with Paris forever."

"But what can you do? You don't know any work."

"I told you before: I'm going to keep house for *you*."

"You're *not* going to keep house for me. And if you intend to stay down here, you can make up your mind you're going to get a job. What did your mother think about your coming?"

"She assumed, of course, that you'd look after me," lied Ruthy. Then, with a sudden wild inspiration that might gain her objective by duress, "She didn't expect, of course, I'd have no alternative but going on the streets."

"Ruth! For heaven's sake — talk sense!"

"Well, you're forcing me to do it. I — I — haven't even got a place — to stay to-night."

"Oh, I'll see you have a place to stay to-night. Did you bring any money?"

"I had just enough for my ticket."

"Have you eaten anything?"

"Not since morning." Two ham sandwiches on the train, a bottle of soda pop at White River Junction, three bananas at Bellows Falls and a half-pound of chocolates at Brattleboro were not of sufficient consequence for a young lady to mention to a young man from whom she desires consideration in terms of support.

"Well, come into this restaurant. We'll get some supper and talk things over."

This was better. Give her time and David could be wheedled into anything. Hadn't her sister proven it? She saw herself being outdone by Alicia. She guessed not!

CHAPTER II

PEOPLE OF NO IMPORTANCE

Ruth's first letter to the family in Vermont nearly sent her mother to bed with concern. "If poor, frail Allie hadn't needed her so badly" Mrs. Kathlyn Parker would have packed her possessions immediately, borrowed some money from some one and caught the first train southward to Springfield.

Ruthy wrote that she felt she was in an environment tuned to her natural assets at last and was "seeing Life" with a capital L. She had arrived in Springfield without damaging incident, becoming acquainted with an awfully good sport of a cigar drummer en route who had later promised to look her up when she wrote or 'phoned him her address. Ruthy had done so several times unsuccessfully until one afternoon his *wife* had answered. Good joke, wasn't it? Well —

She had met David on schedule and gone with him to an "awfully swell cabaret" and he had given her "a lot of money" and afterward secured her a room on the floor below where he lived — in a house run by a spectacular blond woman whose name was Mrs. Pendleton, though all the establishment referred to her as Bella. "The establishment" meant about twenty fellows and girls and two or three old married show folks — *real theatrical people* — who had rooms on the premises and came and went with delightful freedom and as though the place were their own.

Ruthy didn't have time to write a whole lot but there was nothing to that business of living with David and making a home for him unless Willie came down or possibly Rosy (Willie preferred) as David was squeamish about getting in some kind of trouble by folks finding out he was married.

A perfectly swell fellow, by name "Bugs" Hinkle, had a room across the hall and kept her from being lonesome when Dave was chasing off somewhere and calling it work. They — Hinkle and herself — had been to shows or pictures most every night and Sunday were going down the river to a

clambake park on a little steamer called *The Sylvia*. The fellows were all wild about her, just as she had predicted if she ever got out of such a one-horse town as Paris.

Living in furnished rooms had its advantages and disadvantages, she affirmed. There was no piano and when any of "the mob" came in, some of it had to sit on her bed. "Bugs" had a whimsical weakness for playing his mandolin by the hour, stretched on this bed. David had tried several times to act the rôle of Puritan parent but she had given him to understand her life was her own to live and being of age, she would live it as she chose. And the same went for every one up in Vermont.

She had made several efforts to look for work but it was either dirty work which was offered or she found the hours not to her liking. As for David, she guessed he wasn't growing any wrinkles about not having his family kicking about under foot. He was out most of the time anyhow and she did not see him around the clock. She had soon discovered there was little "kick" in going out with David, as all he did was lecture her or play the smug old wise-man. He was "on the outs" with the live ones in the house anyhow, and she guessed he spent most of his time chasing around with that Carrie Flynt, now a nurse in a local hospital.

Most of the girls in the house worked in stores at nice, ladylike jobs as clerks and several of them had promised to speak to their bosses about her. They had a "live-wire custom" of leaving their corsets at home before going out to dances with their fellows, and Ruthy wondered how on earth she had ever been such a hick as to think dancing was any fun while laced in hot corsets.

She would write again when she had found a job or there was news of consequence to report. David was well and though he had naturally thinned with increasing maturity, still she had never seen him looking better in his life. She added, as her secret conviction, that he had a nice little nest egg tucked away somewhere as he ate only at the cheapest restaurants and paid but six dollars for his room.

Between David and certain "loans" she had been able to negotiate—to be repaid when she got a job—she was safely supplied with funds. She hoped her mother and Allie and the twins were well and Allie never knew what she missed by getting married before she knew her own mind

and just to annex a hick she thought would get ahead. Affectionately and so forth — Ruth Frances.

Allie went to bed and cried bitterly that night, the twins asleep against her. Since David had "deserted" her, she had allowed them to do so, one on either arm. In consequence, fearing to roll on them during hours of slumber, she maintained a rigid posture most of the night and arose stiffened and unrefreshed each morning. But they were all she had left of the "wreckage of her happiness" and to have put them in beds of their own would have flavored of the same calloused indifference with which their father had abandoned them to the tender mercies of an abradant world.

There was not the slightest doubt in Allie's mind that her husband was "carrying on" with that unspeakable Flynt person. If it hadn't been for her former presence in Thorn Hedge, of course, David never would have stayed there throughout his illness. He would have been "shipped" instead to Putney Hospital as Allie had directed promptly, on being advised of his indisposition, and thus been kept from the wiles of the vixen. Naturally he had not objected to being nursed by that diminutive husband-snatcher; men were such fools — so susceptible to femininity in the guise of ministering "slaves" while coddling themselves with a spell of illness. Precious little they knew about illness — men. Let them be women for a twelvemonth if they wanted to know the real meaning of physical ailment.

So "that unspeakable Flynt" had gotten in her fine work and "put ideas in his head," turning him against his family — as witness his attempt to get work in Springfield instead of staying on at his job in Thorne's mill so they could all be together and dwell in domestic harmony in "the big, cool, comfortable Ark."

Yes, Allie wept much over the derelictions of the Flynt siren, her shamelessness, her brass, her general all-around wickedness as a turner of men against their loving wives and relatives. Poor, fatherless little babies! Pitiable, pathetic, broken home! Allie tortured herself with the cruelty of her predicament and realized at last she was reliving her mother's life with sickening repetition. God would wreak his vengeance sooner or later on "that insufferable Flynt," however. There was yet justice in the world. The eternal triangle had never yet been built — one side sooner or later

crashed in. So she had read in books with which she tried to drug herself to sleep each night to escape the bitter pain of happy married life gone "flooie"!

Pa Haskell missed David something terrible; felt lost without him, he constantly said. The first six months he mentioned it a dozen times a week; later he had grown glum, silent, taciturn, bellicose. Their only compensation was that he spent most of his hours reading on the front veranda and only came in for his meals. They could not ask him to take up his residence elsewhere. They were living in his house; at least, he had title to the house, though David had been reducing the mortgage. By virtue of once possessing nine hundred dollars and investing it in a piece of haunted real estate, the man had bought an annuity for twenty-five remaining years of his life and he had a stereotyped reply when they remonstrated with him for constituting a heavy item in the domestic budget. "All right, if I'm such a terrible bother, suppose you get out of my house."

Mother Parker had spasmodic urges toward independence that sent her down to the Whitney House as cook or impelled her to do household labor for sundry Preston Hill families. These usually came when the bottom of the family money barrel was in sight or Willie needed clothes or the twins needed rompers. She did this with a meek, long-suffering, such-is-woman's-lot demeanor that brought much favorable comment from people who saw only on the surface and an equal amount of caustic excoriation of the calloused son-in-law who "permitted" his wife's mother to so humiliate herself.

And yet the woman was pitiaibly sincere in her altruism and maternal interest to see her married children get ahead—and her unmarried children raised up and launched in the ways they should go. She sighed over it and she wept over it and she grew larger in the hips and more weary in the feet over it. What "poor Allie" would do without her she could not conceive. She wept for little Hank on a thousand nights, continued to lose her hair till she was nearly bald and rattled the dishes and stove covers needlessly to work off her resentment at Kismet, who had cast her for precisely what she was—the great American mother.

Over Willie she did not worry so much because Willie was Man and the world belonged to its males. Willie had

long since grown beyond the dog and rabbit stage; even the period when he wanted to be a steamboat pilot one moment and an electrical engineer the next. He had lost his freckles and short pants; he was learning the automobile repair business in Will Pease's garage and driving such cars as he pleased about the village which he vaguely described as "testin' 'em out." He occasionally took his mother along when he "tested 'em out." And for the first time in her life Mrs. Parker was introduced to speed and what the landscape resembled in a zooming blur. Willie furthermore shot an excellent game of pool and was acquiring a coarse mouth. He had long since learned to smoke and as he could not always puff cigarettes over a naked gasoline pump, his clothes produced half-consumed packages of "cut plug" whenever his mother pressed them so he could joy-ride with the youngest Pump-ton girl who lived on the road to Bryants'. But he was a good son—as good sons go in small towns; he frequently took his mother to the movies where she required him to read her the titles aloud; occasionally he gave her two dollars and escaped a regular weekly board bill at The Ark by bringing home the Sunday-dinner meat for which he paid without asking reimbursement.

But the real *pièce de résistance* of this "deserted family" was Rosy. For Rosy had come back from Wickford with them, after that octopus of a Hod had "mittened onto" David's choice little money-making newspaper property and family resources had gone utterly arid. She had been given one of the attic rooms in The Ark—up with Gene Garfield's ghost—so that whenever the family awoke to queer noises in the night, they could mentally charge them to Rosy, turn over and sleep peacefully till unhaunted daylight. And from the keeping of books, she had stoically accepted her rôle henceforth as a hewer of wood, a drawer of water, a keeper of poultry and a tender of offspring.

Rosy minded the twins when Allie and her mother did shopping; she kept the furnace fired when Pa Haskell was confined to his bed with rheumatism or too much sitting down. She cleaned out the smoky flues and the stove pipes; she mowed the lawn in the summer and shoveled the walks in the winter. In the dilapidated hencoop in one corner of the rear garden she installed a pair of Rhode Island Reds. They were fruitful and multiplied and the egg money bought

Rosy's raiment. She knew few persons in the town and spoke to no one the clock around.

Rosy was especially useful, however, in that she took the bulk of the household labors off its remaining womenfolk in those first lean years after moving back to Paris, when Allie and her mother discovered it possible to earn neat sums of money by bringing home baskets of underwear from the knitting mill and mending "seconds."

Thereupon the Haskell household was smothered beneath mill "seconds." There were boys' and young men's undies on tables and sewing machines, and ladies' and misses' sizes on chairs and floor. And hour after hour, through gray days of winter, fragrant mornings of spring, sunny afternoons of summer or droning hours of autumn — mother and daughter worked at these endless garments and lamented the general worthlessness of man which acquired dependents and then was unable to sustain them — or solaced themselves that they were "helping"; and thus did womenfolk prove themselves loyal, faithful and constant to their vows when the winds of adversity whistled about The Home or the wolf of inconstancy showed its grisly face at the windows of the Heart.

And through three springs, summers, autumns and winter had this sort of thing gone on, with David "enjoying himself immensely" down in Springfield "without a care in the world," until Ruthy had "flown off the handle" and gone forth to bring down her mother's head in sorrow to the grave.

Yes, life to Mrs. Kathlyn Parker and her oldest daughter was bitter hard, with little gratitude for irksome toil and good intentions, while as for justice — there *was* no justice for women in this life.

Mother and daughter reviewed men often and came to the same unanimous conclusion: All that really mattered in a woman's life were children, paying her debt to society by supplanting offspring to take the place of parents as they passed — making each succeeding generation just a little better than the last.

So they existed — people of no importance!

CHAPTER III

CONCERNING BAD PENNIES

Big Jim Thorne became embroiled in a lawsuit with the Federal Government later in that summer of 1915 over knit goods supplied to the Army. He took Len Brickhart and Bob Hentley, our crack local attorneys, and motored to Washington by way of New York. I went with them as far as Springfield—partly for the motor trip, partly to visit friends on a two days' vacation.

Vernon Street back in 1915 was far from being the pretentious boulevard bridge-approach of the present. It was a narrow, dank little side thoroughfare running from Main Street down toward the Connecticut. Elms and maples flanked its uneven brick sidewalks, shutting off the sunlight from the windows of its four-story brick blocks given over to furriers and cut-rate dentists, beauty parlors and theatrical rooming houses, with here and there a domicile grimly watched by police.

I turned into Vernon Street about seven-forty-five in the morning after vainly trying to connect with David by telephone the previous night. My ring at the Pendleton establishment brought a good-looking, slovenly dressed negress from dusky depths behind, who directed me up the stairs with the largest and whitest display of ivory that ever escaped a billiard ball factory.

"Who is it?" drawled a sleepy voice, as I rapped on the designated panels. But he opened the door quickly enough when I declared my identity. He had stumbled from bed to slip a thick blue bathrobe over cheap pajamas. His hair was tousled; he was groggy with sleep. He lit a cigarette with unsteady hand when the first surprised greeting was over and cleared off a chair for me to sit down.

"But there's no need for hurry," he said, when I had suggested breakfast together before he went to his work. "I expected to sleep till noontime, anyhow. At two o'clock I go out to East Springfield. There's a flying meet out there

I've got to cover — one of the pilots is a Vermont chap who lived a long time here in Springfield. Interview. Sunday story. How's everybody up to Paris?"

"Get into your clothes. We'll talk while you shave." For he needed a shave — a massage — a Turkish bath — anything to roll either fatigue or dissipation from features and body.

He caught up a towel and padded out to the bath which left me alone in his room. I looked about in compassion. After all the sums he had earned — and expended on other people — for him there was only — *this!*

It was a high-ceilinged room on the second floor, facing north and admitting no sunlight. Its only windows — two of them — were at the front, looking into the boughs of a venerable maple. On its floor was a threadbare carpet of faded color, worn into strips. Against the east wall, between hall door and windows, stood a half-sized iron bed with mattress looking uncomfortably thin. At the back of the room I saw a trunk, some chairs, a wooden packing crate with books piled on top. A battered table-desk across from the bed held a typewriter and a general litter of papers and manuscripts. There was opened mail on the table; some of the enclosures being dunning bills from merchants in Wickford, demanding faster payments on account or threatening legal action. The place at night was lighted by gas; a tube ran down from a wall-jet over the typewriter to a student's lamp with a Welsbach burner. The walls held a couple of lithograph calendars but I saw no pictures, except that directly back of his typewriter, and on a line with his eye, was a single snapshot of Allie and the twins held in place with a mammoth pin.

It had already started to curl and fade.

There was clutter everywhere — books, clothing, soiled linen, manuscripts, clipped newspapers, waxed-papered remnants of delicatessen lunches, here and there was an empty milk bottle, tobacco tins, shoes, neckties; all were tossed around and heaped in the careless disorder of quarters that rarely knew feminine inspection.

I was standing before his desk, looking through some of the typewritten manuscripts, when he returned wet-haired, the towel hung over one shoulder. "What's the big idea?" I asked, indicating a sheaf of manuscript. "Trying to write a play?"

"Every newspaperman tries to write a play! Show me one who doesn't and I'll point out a goof who expects to graduate from journalism into the plumbing supply business."

"Only this stuff is good, Davie. When did you do it?"

"Worked on it a lot last winter. Got sort of discouraged this spring and summer. Had a lot of trouble concentrating — my nerves are so jumpy."

I continued to glance through the manuscript while he dressed. It was a three-act comedy titled, "How's The Family?" I saw readily enough what the poor chap was doing. Making his domestic experience into a comedy! A *comedy*!

"Why don't you finish it?"

"Maybe I will, when I have more time. Somehow lately I've lost my pep. And since Ruthy arrived ——"

"Oh, yes, where is Ruthy?"

"Lives downstairs in a room under this. That is, when she's home. Lord knows how she spends her time — or where. It isn't in her room with books."

"Is she working?"

"Working? Ruthy? She's been here five weeks and worked less than five days. Got a job in a candy store for a while but ate so much of the stock she made herself sick. By the time she got back, her place had been filled."

"What supports her?"

"I do, principally. At least I pay her room rent. She's always borrowing money."

"Boy-struck as usual, I suppose?"

"I only wish they were — *boys*! I call them bums. Sometimes I think — I ought to send for her mother. But that might mean supporting the old lady, if I once got her down here. And I can't. I simply can't!"

He combed his hair and finished his dressing. We went out to a restaurant and ordered breakfast. "Rather rocky going, isn't it, David?"

"It's hell," he said thickly.

"You've seen Carrie, of course?"

"Ran into her Thursday up on Court Square. She's in training at Wesson's. Gets one afternoon off a month."

"What do you do for companionship, recreation?"

"Those things cost money, old scout. And I haven't the

money. I'm lucky to have enough left each week to keep me in tobacco."

"You've got a good job?"

"I've got a peach of a job — under one of the finest chiefs a man ever had. Sometimes I get a twinge of conscience when I take his money."

I stabbed at my grapefruit and tried to convince myself that less than eight years bygone, this prematurely aging man had been a stumble-footed country gawk, tearing a trouser rip in a chicken yard to escape the persecutions of a village mopsy. His clumsy adolescence had gone. The fat had vanished from ears, elbows, wrists and ankles. He had learned how to wear his clothes.

"You can't go on like this forever, David. Suppose you break down?"

He did not answer for a time. He seemed to have no relish for the steak, though he quickly drank his coffee and ordered a second cup. Looking out over Main Street, he mused, "Dunno, Bill, sometimes I feel so numb inside I just don't care if I break or not. It's a queer sensation. Just a few years ago, I had a lot of enthusiasm. It seemed there was nothing I couldn't accomplish. I worked hard in Hank Parker's store — darned hard! It went up in smoke, yet I wasn't sorry. But the Wickford smash seemed to sap me limp. I couldn't blame Thorne. He had a lot of good money invested. And I couldn't expect you or Hod or Thorne to step in, clean up my mess and then hand it back. It took a lot out of me, all the same. Ripped an awful hole in my vanity, I suppose — hurt my pride and nicked my self-confidence. Remember the night we sat in the office, Bill, and I said I wanted to taste of life — every experience — so I could know how it felt from personal contact? What an ass I was to talk so! Less than eight years ago. Oh, Lord!"

"But you remember, too, David, what I told you about success — how the real victors in this world are the opportunists. Carried by lawless currents to strange shores, they build themselves palaces of the soul from the driftwood scattered along the beaches of infinity?"

"I remember. Yes. But there's times when it seems as though no award that can come can possibly be worth the effort it costs. I'm empty inside, Bill — just a money ma-

chine — pounding typewriter keys day after day and week after week to support a lot of people I don't see from month's end to month's end — who are really a lot of strangers with whom I've nothing in common but a pair of little girls."

"David, did you ever think of divorcing Allie and marrying some girl who might help you to feel life is really worth while?"

"Divorcing — Allie? For what?"

"For the way she's cheated you of the thing that's every man's birthright — a home, affection, the camaraderie of one woman whose life belongs to her husband inviolate —"

"Bill — she isn't — running around with any other man up in Paris, is she?"

"Allie hasn't energy enough to run around with any other man. She's the most indolent woman in Vermont — and she calls it constancy."

"She's never been strong since she had the twins —"

"A lean horse for a long race, David. Your wife's a darned sight stronger than her husband, right this moment."

Again that old, old gesture he had made in the *Telegraph* office the night he had defended Allie from threatened discharge. "We can't judge women like men, Bill. They're made of finer, more sensitive stuff. They've got to be humored, helped, protected — hang it all, I can't explain it myself. It's a feeling — an overwhelming feeling — that goes away down in the instincts and emotions."

"And makes you a slave to a woman's fraud!"

His lip quivered a bit. "They're different," he contended stubbornly. "*Only — I wish — they'd respect that feeling — that instinct. I wish they wouldn't take advantage of it and run a fellow ragged.*"

"They don't want to respect it, David — some of them. You remember we said something that night about lifting womanhood on a pedestal? I told you they didn't want to be lifted on pedestals. Some day, my son, you'll get it through your thick bump of distorted chivalry that what they want is to be trodden under foot, kicked around, abused, *mastered*. There's much of the child in every feminine make-up, David. It not only wants protection, but it wants authority held over it. Women love it. They may kick and rail against it. They'll fly mad if you accuse them of it. But the man who humors women, gives them their way, coddles

them, lets them do the managing, earns nothing but their contempt."

"That's stone age stuff, Bill ——"

"Woman has never quite graduated from the stone age, son. And that instinct to be made to obey, to be conquered, directed, commanded into submission, is just as deep rooted in Allie as your instincts to protect and coddle her are rooted in you. Have you ever considered what might have happened had you taken Allie by the shoulders on one of those occasions when she stood up for her mother against her husband? Can't you see how different things might have turned out if you'd laid down the law in your own home, ordered the relatives to get out and stay out, demanded that she run her domicile by her own unaided effort, insisted that she stand and deliver according to her matrimonial contract?"

"There'd have been a row that tore the shingles off the roof."

"Maybe. But after the row was ended and you'd established that you were the manager, don't you think she'd have loved you and respected you a darned sight more than she does to-day?"

"No. She'd have gone into a spell that might have ended in a madhouse."

"You think so? Then precious little you know Woman — any more than the night you married one. A woman never has 'spells' unless she thinks she can employ them for an objective successfully. If you'd squashed the 'spell' business with a good rousing bucket of cold water, Allie never would have tried one again. A woman wants to fear a man — a little — before she loves him. You've got it to learn. Or rather, you're learning it at a hideous price. And along with learning it — you're not fair to the woman herself in the bargain."

"Well — if having a woman love you means knocking her around from sunrise to sunset — I guess that lets me out."

"All the same, by not putting your foot down firmly and ordering your own domestic affairs you've been unjust to Allie. That was Ma Parker's score with Little Hank. He wasn't big enough physically or temperamentally to com-

mand her respect and he didn't have any will power; only temper and stubbornness."

"I've seen him get bellicose enough. It didn't appear to accomplish much good. Oh, rot! Let's forget it. Come along up to the flying field with me and let's ignore the whole skirted kiboodle."

Yet another hour slipped away in similar conversation before we finally paid our check and caught a street car out to East Springfield. It was nearly eleven o'clock when we had walked the half-mile from the end of the carline to the great level space of open country that served for a flying field.

"You say you're going to interview an aviator from Vermont?" I asked, as a machine flew over our heads with engine stopped and a washing sound of air through propeller and struts.

"'Honey' Carmen. Ever hear of him? His folks live up near White River Junction."

Somehow, in the back of my brain, the name seemed familiar. "Don't you recall that about the time I fell sick at Thorne's he crashed through a theater roof in Montreal? The papers were full of it. Never hurt him a bit—a miracle!"

I placed the fellow then but became interested in the activity surrounding us. In the warm noon breeze planes rested lightly on earth, ethereal, birdlike, tilting gracefully in the wind, tugging at their moorings, anxious to be away in the cloudless heavens where presently they would soar. Spectators arrived in knots of threes and fours, coming by motor car and trolley. Across the field they streamed, from time to time clearing a track as an airplane skidded in a great half-circle, its engines barking sharply, then with a furious exhaust of smoke and noise it thrashed across turf and stubble and came zooming toward us—to lift gently from earth and rise majestically above our heads. A moment later we saw it—a buzzing speck in vaulted cobalt.

"Want to go up?" asked David.

"Nothing doing!" I laughed. "You've been up?" Flying for the general public was hardly the sport which it is at present.

"Lots of times. I've even flown over Mt. Tom."

"Aren't you afraid of breaking your neck?"

"I should worry. I'd be out of my troubles!"

The machines, however, interested me. Grimy fellows in overalls were tightening wires, making engine adjustments, cursing refractory propellers. Here and there lounged romantic, leather-clad figures—men of ponderous jaws and cold gray eyes who puffed cigarettes and spoke with soft voices. I was surprised at David's acquaintance among these men. Meanwhile, where was this Carmen? I put the question to David.

"Due any minute now," said a tall, broad-shouldered birdman a few feet away who had overheard. He looked at his watch.

Noon came—announced by the whistles in the near-by factories. The stunt flying was scheduled to begin at two o'clock. We bought sandwiches and ginger pop and I made Dave forego his incessant cigarettes and smoke a cigar. We were observing our friend of the watch making ready for "contact" when a little cry of voices arose about us.

"Here comes Honey!"

We turned. A great gray-white plane was barking savagely far above our heads, circling about and around for the chance to get down. A policeman began herding the crowd to the side lines. The white plane's pilot closed off his engine. He began to volplane. Some one in the cockpit waved an arm in greeting. It looked like a woman.

It *was* a woman. The plane from Mineola took a last swing at the southern end of the field and came up the landing course with drag stick digging deeply. Half a dozen times it bumped, then taxied gracefully to where we were waiting. Honey Carmen sat for a moment adjusting controls, unhooking his life belt. Then he raised his goggles and unlaced his helmet. He was a wiry little fellow—who looked as though he had been fed all his life on lean bacon.

"Howdy, folks!" he said, as though merely speaking across a room.

Pulling himself up, he stepped between the wings to assist out the girl—his passenger. She had trouble with the hook on her goggles. She finally got them off by unfastening her helmet and shaking free her hair. It fell in an unleashed flood on perfect shoulders.

"Whee-e-e-e!" she cried relievedly.

"Lord in heaven!" came a hoarse voice at my shoulder.
The girl in the cockpit was Lillian Whalen!

I thought, like David, we were seeing a ghost.

She was older, of course. She had taken on weight but not at the price of physical charm. Clad in glistening brown leather like the pilot, it only brought out the lines of a figure that was startling in sheer feminine perfection — the acme of graceful curve and proportion.

Yet it was old Jeek's daughter — the Paris mopsy of eight years before, blossomed into something acutely dangerous to man. She climbed down and stood there athletically, trying to pull goggles and helmet apart.

"Lillian!" cried David when he could speak.

The girl raised a startled face. The blood fanned out. She too was stunned — and *stunning!*

"For the love of Jack!" was all she said for a moment. She looked from Dave's face to mine in equal stupefaction. Then she turned to her bird-man. "The fellow I was telling you about, Jo. Dave Haskell!"

Carmen appeared to accept this as a sort of introduction. He extended his hand. I was glad the police had roped off the crowd.

Dave found his tongue. "I thought — everybody thinks — you dead —"

She made an impulsive step forward, raising a quick hand in warning. "Please!" she begged. "Not here — *that!*"

The boy blinked stupidly.

"You're just a good boyhood friend of mine, understand?" We continued to move away from the crowd — out of ear-shot. "What are you doing here?" she asked him.

"I'm assistant Sunday editor on one of the local dailies. I intended to write up Carmen. Bill just happened to be here — came down to Springfield on a brief trip to see me."

Lill looked us over. I realized she was almost as tall as myself. And what a romantic figure she made in sunshine almost as yellow as her hair, dressed in her smooth leathern jacket and knickers! Her voice, too, had altered. She used better English; her tone had a sophisticated twang that frequently passes for culture.

"Well," she said finally, as we stood by ourselves near the

corner of a big corrugated-iron hangar, "I'm hoping you boys will be good sports enough to have lenient memories."

"You've changed — since the last time I saw you," Dave said frankly. The shock of the meeting was lessening.

"That applies to you as well."

"I had a whole summer of illness. It began just a few hours after I left you — at Barber's Camp. Remember?"

"I could if I tried. But I don't want to try."

"But you've got to satisfy my curiosity enough to tell me where you went. They had a posse out looking for you all over. They even dragged the river for a time till they decided the current had carried your body down the Connecticut."

She unfastened the leathern jacket. "You mean, what became of me? I wandered off into the woods in delirium — and fell in the Montpelier highroad. Jo, here, found me — or rather, his chauffeur did. They were coming back by auto from that nasty smash in Montreal — down to his mother's. They couldn't leave me lying in the road. They took me along. Mother Burrows nursed me back to health the rest of that awful summer —"

"Mother Burrows?"

"Jo's mother. Honey Carmen is only his 'circus' name. I darned near passed out."

"Your folks think you're dead."

"Let them! Something *did* die in me after that experience. Jo's mother became a sort of mother to me also. I pulled myself together and turned a clean page. I'd have married Jo, I suppose, if he didn't have a wife in California — a cat too selfish to give him his freedom. As it is — well, I'm just his sister."

Dave glanced at me and Lillian saw the look. "That's on the level!" she added grimly.

Somehow I felt sure it was on the level. She was not the Lillian of Farrell's lunch room, of Beech Street at midnight, looting a drunken man, of the *Wickford Times* office, of a sordid encounter with Pinney. Her perfect body radiated health; there was no longer need of cosmetics on her face. And she had taken on polish. In all I saw of her that day, not once did I hear her use profanity.

"You've been with him down to New York?"

"I'm working there in an office. He brought me this

far on the way home to visit Mother Burrows. I'm going the rest of the way by train—to-morrow. You live here in Springfield?"

"I *exist* here in Springfield," said David lamely.

"What's the matter? Folks down here too?"

"No, they're still in Vermont."

"You had a wife, didn't you? I remember she raised an unearthly racket——"

"She's also up in Vermont."

Lill frowned slightly. Then she laughed. "Well, you were a darned good sport to me, David. I'll tell the world that. A whole lot better than I ever deserved."

"You've forgiven me, then, for being instrumental in having you 'reformed' in Vergennes?" he dared to suggest.

"Mercy, yes! That belongs to the Lillian who died." She slipped from the coat, threw it down on the turf and tried to fan herself with the helmet. Suddenly she laid her hand on the Vermont lad's arm. "I'm going to pay you back that money you loaned me, David. Every cent of it. I've expected to do it long before this but wondered how I could manage it without the Paris folks knowing I didn't drown."

"That's all right, Lill. I—don't—need it now!"

"You're lying, Dave Haskell. You're having a merciless scrape to get along."

"How do you know?"

"Do you think I'm a fool? Sick a whole summer, were you? Who said you'd recovered?"

The boy's eyes held hers for a time. Then he averted his face.

I saw something compassionate, something maternal, show on the Whalen girl's features. Then she patted his wrist.

"I haven't forgotten, dear boy, that when I sent you that crazy note—you didn't ignore me. You *came*! Can't we get an automobile? I have my suit case in the fuselage. I want to go down street—to a hotel—and shed these hot leather clothes."

"I think I can find one. But I want to see Carmen."

"You'll see Carmen. When he gets through his stunts we'll all eat together. It's like meeting an old lover to find you, David. You don't know—how long—I've really been heartsick—to see you and square myself."

I strolled away, leaving them talking. I felt a hand on

my shoulder and turned to find Carmen — or Jo Burrows — at my elbow. He wished me to follow him out of the noise.

Over behind the hangar the lean little fellow began rolling a cigarette. "You come from her home town, don't you?" he demanded.

I told him I had known Lill since she was a little bare-footed tad throwing bricks at passing carriages — if drivers were so indiscreet as to venture down past the crude mill shanties.

Honey Carmen nodded grimly, whetting the edge of his cigarette. "I thought I overheard her say something about my mother. What was it?"

"She said your mother straightened her out."

"It's a blooming lie!" Carmen struck a match on his shoe-tap.

"I suppose so," I sighed. "Lill handled the truth with shyness of old."

"It's a blooming lie," repeated the birdman. "My mother let her stay in our place until she was well enough to travel. But she never straightened her out. Lill straightened out herself!"

"She *did*!"

"You bet your sweet life she did!" Carmen ground his match in the turf with his heel. "There's a case of the darndest piece of female grit I ever saw in my life. Tell me — did that newspaper chap ever think her a — virago?"

"What makes you ask?"

"We picked her up on a wild mountain road in the moonlight. She came staggering out of the undergrowth — clothes torn off, hair snarled, face and arms running blood where she'd been scratched by the brush. When the head lamps first picked her up, we thought her an animal. Then she collapsed. We didn't know who she was or how she got there. We just loaded her in and lugged her to mother's. Well, she raved all that night. Doctor discovered what she'd been through. And she darned near died. Then for a week she lay as though stunned. Finally mother heard her talking to herself one afternoon. She was saying — like a little prayer — 'I've gone through it; I've *lived* through it! There must be a reason. If I've gone through it, it means I must keep on living — for one purpose. If I was all bad,

I'd surely have died. The Good is fighting for the chance to live, but no one can give it that chance but me.' Over and over she kept talking that sort of thing. Aloud!"

"I'll be darned!"

"We felt the same way. It seems, from other things she said, that no man had ever treated her like a lady but this young Haskell. All the rest had booted and looted her. He treated her white and tried to help her when she was down. It got under her skin. She got the obsession she had to stand and deliver to keep some sort of faith with him, I suppose. Anyhow, she got up off that sick bed and the way she tried to repay was pathetic."

"Did she repay you?"

"We made her call it off. There was no reason why she should. There was a Y. M. C. A. secretary — a physical instructor — boarding with us that summer. People named Manning. Manning and his wife got interested in the girl, straightened her out physically, got her to swim and ride and do exercises. You see the shape she's in? She's kept it up ever since. When they went away in the fall, they took her with them to New York. But she wouldn't live with them; she went to work. She got a job in an office running some sort of machine that duplicated letters. Somehow she worked up. You can believe it or not, that girl's saved nearly two thousand dollars in the past three years and has one of the finest little apartments in New York City — with another girl — and if you think you can stay in the place after ten o'clock, try it and learn."

I glanced across the intervening space of field. I could see the girl of whom he spoke — and Dave — reclining on the turf. The girl's head was a flaming flood of gold in high noon sunlight. Dave was pegging his knife in the grass; Lill's well-turned legs were outstretched before her; she was leaning back on stiffened arms as they talked. I had no reason to doubt the aviator's word. He was not the type whose word one doubts.

"You may wonder why I'm telling all this to you. It's because all that girl wanted was a chance. She got it. I guess you can tell she's changed by the look of her. But I'd hate to have you go back to Vermont and start any talk that might discourage her, pull her back down after the glorious fight she's made to come clean."

"You think I would?"

"I don't know how you regard her. But to me, she's a sister, and I don't want her hurt. One man tried it. Young colt by the name of Starring — son of the theatrical producer, Thornton Starring. The colt got some knock-out drops into her one night and started raising hob. Half-drugged as she was, she fought him to a frazzle. The police broke in and pinched the whole joint. When she wouldn't talk about her record, they thought of course it was bad. It almost floored her for a time, that scrape. Everything seemed on the brink of disaster. Everything *would* have been if they'd sent her up. But I happened to get word from her roommate and I went to the kid's rich father. He was white. He not only squared it but gave his kid a thrashing. Those were city people — moreover, were strangers. I wouldn't want people up in her home town to —"

"I understand perfectly."

"There's good blood in Lill somewhere. I'm inclined to think that newspaper guy's decency brought it out. I thought from her description he had a trifle more beef and pep — more of a he-man, instead of being — just a hack. But maybe if there were more chaps like him — in their treatment of womanhood — there'd be far less of them skid in the ditch."

The man was called away a half-moment later. I stood smoking and thinking — especially of the birdman's last statement as against what I had told David that morning at breakfast.

Which one of us was right?

CHAPTER IV

THEY ALSO SERVE

Mrs. Fanny Thorne had died the previous October. Carrie too was now in Springfield. I had to see her before quitting the city. I went up to the High Street hospital at sunset and asked for an interview.

She seemed glad to see me when she later came down a painfully white corridor in her neat nurse's uniform and a scarf about her shoulders. She had the evening off duty. She suggested a walk. We strolled up High Street to Walnut and out to Benton Park. And for the first few minutes I had to get acquainted with Carrie Flynt anew. She was that type of woman.

Her smallness of stature surprised me. I hadn't seen her for a year and had thought of her as being larger. Her bulky starched uniform destroyed the lines of her statuette figure. She was as prim as ever but somehow reticent. Maybe it was the contrast of her cooler, smaller, quieter personality with the flame of Lill Whalen's physical perfection. Anyhow, I delivered Jim's message and the money he had sent; we reached Benton Park and sat down near the fountain.

"I've been with Dave Haskell to-day," I declared. "You know he's assistant Sunday editor on one of the local papers."

"Yes," she replied — and waited. That was ever Carrie. She — waited. And yet I detected a little flutter in her breathing as she sat beside me, tiny feet close together, hands clasped primly on her knees.

"I went there — to his room — before he was awake this morning. While he was absent at his bath, I couldn't help looking over his desk. And I found something that's upset me, Carrie, all day."

I put my hand to a pocket and brought out a bottle — a pint bottle of rye, one half consumed. I had brought it away, thinking to discard it — with no opportunity up to that moment.

"Is — it — liquor?"

"No — it's *booze*! I found it on his desk, half covered by a newspaper. Carrie, Dave's too young — he's got too much talent — too fine a future — to have this happen." No one being near, I uncorked the bottle, poured it in the fountain and tossed the bottle in a nearby waste-box.

She did her old trick of drawing in her upper lip between tiny teeth and holding it tightly when distressed. That was her only reaction now — for the moment. Then she dropped her dark brown eyes as she said — faintly:

"Poor Davie! I get so mad at Miss Parker sometimes I could almost go up to Vermont and — scratch out her eyes."

"You know all about — his family?"

"How could I help it? Didn't he rave out the whole sad story through that first awful week of his fever? And of course I constantly got the rest through Daddy Jim."

"He's down here alone, living alone, working alone, playing alone — because to live, work, play with others costs him money. And he needs his money to keep his bills paid up north. Carrie, what on earth can I do?"

She was not the girl to sigh, exclaim, have a "spell." She sat motionless for a time and then she said, "There is nothing to do. Events must work themselves out. Mother Parker's children will eventually marry and have homes of their own. That will relieve him of them. The two old people will eventually die; that will eliminate *them*. The time will arrive when there will be but himself and Miss Parker. And, of course, their children. We must wait for that time."

"But he'll smash at this rate, long before then!"

"We must have faith to believe he will not. All sorts of things may happen. Relief may come from quarters most unexpected."

I sensed a sudden feeling of chagrin. Old ass that I was, I had called her out to try and persuade her to let David have her company to keep up his grit. For I had never forgotten the incident he had later reported to me after settling in Wickford — that night in the midnight smoker, leaning forward with unspeakable grief in his hot young heart, while he groaned to himself, "God help me — I've married the wrong girl!"

Now that I had her beside me in all her primness, her dignified respectability, I knew how foolish — and how futile

— such a suggestion must ever be. David was a married man — married to a certain “Miss Parker.” That was the beginning and end of everything for the Little Toy Lady, though probably had he been single and heart-free, she would not have encouraged him in the slightest. But once pursued and married, she would have been his willing slave through life, throughout eternity — granting there is one and men and women continue association in it. I compromised by saying:

“He thinks a lot of you, Carrie. He has always thought a lot of you ——”

“But he married Miss Parker!” Her eyes were set straight ahead; again she drew in her upper lip and closed her teeth on it.

“— and has seen his mistake and is paying for it cruelly.”

“Perhaps! I’m so sorry!”

“How much do you really think of David, Carrie? I’m old enough to be your dad and I’m interested in you both.”

She replied calmly and without the slightest hesitation: “I would sacrifice myself in any way demanded — even if it meant my life — to bring him success and — a song in his heart.”

And then, abruptly, the Little Toy Lady began to weep. I thought she was laughing quietly at first and did not look up. But it continued and I knew she was sobbing. The tears ran down her small, prim face and she smeared them away without finding her handkerchief. The weeping halted as abruptly as it had begun. And that is all she ever told me.

Break open an old maid’s heart, verily, and find the initials of a man!

I went back to Vermont that night, wondering what I had accomplished, deciding myself a meddling old fool mixing in something better left to Kismet. And yet I had an intuition that my young friend’s plight was not exactly static — not after seeing Lillian that day in her rehabilitation and having that evening’s talk with Carrie.

I reached the office. Sam Hod had arrived. The back room was humming with activity — the grind of getting out a new day’s paper.

“Well,” sang out my partner, “have a good trip?”

“Darned if I know, Sam. Time’s got to tell.”

"See Ruthy's new husband?"

"*Ruthy's* new husband?"

"Sure. Don't mean to say you was right there in Springfield and didn't find out?"

"Find out what?"

"About Ruthy's gettin' married. Her mother was in here all a flutter few minutes ago and wanted me to be sure and get it in the to-night's paper."

"I spent the day with David and — some friends. In the evening I saw Carrie. Didn't meet up with Ruthy at all."

"Well, accordin' to the telegram her mother got, Ruthy eloped around noon yesterday with a feller named Hinkle. Don't suppose she caught sight of you and thought you might have been sent by her mother to lug her back up to Vermont?"

"Maybe!" I said. But recalling Dave's description of Ruthy's associates, I pondered, "Wonder if she's taken him for better or for worse?"

CHAPTER V

BREAD FROM THE WATERS

Ruth's elopement may have had something to do with taking a certain amount of subconscious worry off Dave Haskell's mind; he may have accepted the fact that having acquired the Hinkle fellow for better or worse Ruthy could do no worse and let it go at that. But after that day spent together in Springfield, stimulated perchance by my approval of what he had already produced, the lad picked up the discarded manuscript of his play.

He was laboring over it one August evening when he heard a rapping at his door above the clicking of his typewriter keys. It was a soft, hesitant rapping, as might have been done by a feminine knuckle covered with a smooth kid glove. He arose and crossed to the door.

For an instant he failed to recognize his visitor. The hall was darkened by oncoming evening. The features were shadowed by a floppy Panama hat with a band of flowers — a hat not unlike Ruthy's. It was the voice which aroused him to his caller's identity. "Hello, Davie! Do you mind if I intrude for a talk?" And with a gesture of indescribable grace, as though he had already accorded permission, the girl outside lifted her hand and pulled off her hat.

"Lillian!" he cried, dumfounded. Then at once a wave of chagrin assailed him. He forgot she was the girl of Farrell's restaurant, of the paper-mill squabble, of the nighttime highway west of Wickford. He was only conscious of a gorgeous specimen of femininity standing before him, in a white georgette frock with elbow length gloves and patent leather pumps. About her naked throat and down to her girdle hung a rope of jade beads.

But it was the riot of her tawny hair that ever paragraphed Lill Whalen in his mind. And even in the waning light he could distinguish the deep-sea green of her eyes.

"Have you — been in town — all week?" He backed away and looked blankly around for a chair to offer her.

"No, no. I'm on my way back to New York from Ver-

mont. I had to stop off and see you. You've been in mind constantly ever since Thursday."

She entered. At least she crossed over the threshold. There she paused. David saw that she carried a dainty white parasol. Standing this parasol before her, hands upon it though she held the hat in one of them, she appraised his quarters.

All the sordidness, the tawdry cheapness which I had found, did not escape her. The bed, at seven in the evening, was still unmade. David had been ransacking among his papers; the breeze coming over the transom had swept many off upon the carpet. He had dined that night from a dozen greasy doughnuts. The bag holding five of them was still agape upon his desk; half a doughnut set on a bookpile at his elbow.

"Sit down," he invited, confused. "I don't have many visitors. I'm not in shape for much company."

"I didn't have the opportunity, Thursday, to say all the things I wished. You're sure I'm not intruding?"

"I was only working — to amuse myself. On a play," he added lamely.

"David," she asked candidly, slowly, as though weighing her words, "is this room — your *home*?"

"I sleep here, anyhow. It's the only place I've got."

She turned her head and inventoried the trunk, the packing-case, the scattered books, the clothing tossed around.

"But — can't you afford anything better — more comfortable?" She said it softly, sympathetically, as though it hurt.

He colored, though she had not meant it cruelly. She was perturbed too — and strangely solicitous.

"No," he said, a trifle defiantly because of his chagrin. "I can't."

"Why not, David?"

"The same old matter of family finances — if you really must know."

She moved forward then, whimsically, the door ajar behind her. She hung her floppy Panama on the knob of the bed's footboard and stood the parasol against it. Instinctively she fluffed up her gorgeous hair.

"So you're writing a play?"

"I might strike a knock-out, and make a rotten lot of money. Anyhow, it amuses me. It's a comedy."

"It naturally would be. I haven't forgotten the sort of thing you did for the *Telegraph* up home. What's its theme?"

"A wild west cowpuncher trying to run a finishing school for young ladies."

She laughed for the first time then. "What do you know about a wild west cowpuncher? Or — for that matter — a young ladies' finishing school?"

"The combination holds comedy, anyhow."

"Why don't you try dramatizing some of the home folks up in Vermont? If you'll forgive me, I'd say some of your own experiences might make far better — *comedy*."

"I will — maybe — some day." He was ill at ease and toyed with his pipe. Lillian refused to talk across the space of the room. She pulled the only available rocker up closer. "Smoke it, David," she suggested, indicating the pipe. "Don't mind me. I'm just — Lill Whalen."

"You're not the Lill Whalen — I knew up in Paris!"

"Oh, yes, I am. With a little more experience. The better kind of experience," she added huskily. She leaned back in the rocker, toyed with the rope of beads, appraised him through narrowed lids. Frequently she bit at the beads. Dave filled his pipe. The smoke helped his nerves.

"This is funny — you and me — sitting so, down here in Springfield. And less than ten days ago I thought you were — dead." Immediately he had said it he wished that he hadn't. Somehow it harked back to that awful afternoon at Barber's.

"I don't know where I'd rather be, David." Yet her voice held no boldness.

"Why?"

"I don't know — I feel somehow as if meeting you again — being with you — conveyed a sense of compensation. It's elusive. Don't ask me to explain it — yet."

This from Lill Whalen, to escape from whom eight years before he had fled through a chicken yard. The pock-marked ash cat had fallen on better times and disclosed itself a thoroughbred. Its fur was clean now and sleek, its neck held a ribbon. Its wits were doubtless no less keen, but it no longer expected missiles to come from uncertain directions.

"Compensation?" he repeated.

"*Please!* Don't ask me to explain it — yet. If I ever can, at all." She held the beads up before her and viewed them against the dying light. She seemed to have no special mission there. At least her manner implied no anxiety to get it over.

"We both had a rather tough time of it up in Paris," the lad said gravely. "And we never understood each other, I guess. You often scared me, Lill, stiff all over. I was awful green in those days. I don't know what I thought you could do to me. But all the same, I was terrified."

"It was wicked of me," she responded. "I was a bad little girl in those days, David. And they're not so long ago, either. I guess I — got a bad start."

Still she did not offer to explain her presence. She appeared content to sit quietly in his company. Once or twice he saw her close her eyes. The room grew darker.

"I'll light the gas."

"No. Please don't! It's good to sit here in the twilight. It seems like a dream."

"I'm sorry my room looks so rumpled. But you can't have Ritz-Carlton service on Beer Alley tariff."

"Where's your wife?" Lillian clicked her beads on her teeth.

"Up in Paris. As I told you Thursday, she stays up there and keeps the home for her mother and my father. You knew she had two little girls?"

"What does she think of you living like this?"

"It doesn't make much difference. She never comes down. I always go up."

"When did you go up last?"

"Washington's Birthday."

"It's now August!"

"I know. It costs money to travel — even up to Vermont."

"But — how does she live? What supports her?"

"I send them money — the family — all I don't spend myself."

"What do *you* get out of such money as you send them?"

"Me? Why — I don't get anything."

"And don't you think that you should?"

"Men don't — as a rule."

"Then why do they keep on doing it?"

Lill stopped biting the beads and looked at him curiously.

They were rapidly becoming two silhouettes in the darkness — in which Dave's pipe bowl showed as a lambent ember. Finally, in low, lucid voice, Lill Whalen said candidly — again weighing her words — speaking with conviction:

"Dave Haskell, I think you're the finest, whitest boy I've ever known in my life. And my experience with men hasn't been — provincial."

He suppressed that old, old panic to flee her presence — though now the motive was changed.

"But it takes an ash-cat girl to recognize it — a girl who's known men who were not quite so white."

The boy did not know what reply to make.

"David," went on the girl, "I think this an outrage — a damnable outrage. Forgive the coarseness."

"What's an outrage?"

"The way people have mulcted you — are still mulcting you. The way you're living. Did you eat any dinner to-night or merely munch at those greasy doughnuts?"

He had completely forgotten the bag. He crushed it now in the dark. "I wasn't — very hungry — to-night."

"I know better. I think it's a damnable outrage — you living in a tawdry room like this, sleeping in an unmade bed, getting your meals from a paper bag, your clothes thrown around in such fashion. And all the while you're earning good money to support and keep a lot of lazy relatives who only think of themselves —"

"Allie isn't lazy. She's one of the hardest working women I ever knew."

"For you or for herself?"

"For her relatives, her children, her home —"

"It's my turn to scoff, dear friend. She may be hard-working, perhaps, but not for *you*. Do you imagine if I really loved a man I'd be content to let him remain away from me from February to August and not give a care how he's living, eating, sleeping — how he's being taken care of — whether he's happy — what sort of life he knows outside his work? Do you imagine if I loved a man I could stand it to have him away from me from February to August *anyhow*?"

"Oh, Allie wants me bad enough. She cries a lot over it. I don't get a letter that she doesn't ask me to give up down here in Springfield — get a job again up in Paris —"

"Why doesn't *she* come to *you*?"

"She can't, can she, with her mother and all?"

"A woman sticks with the person she loves best. And don't you forget it."

"She'd come with me if it wasn't for the relatives!"

"Then by what decree, human or divine, does a married woman consider it incumbent upon herself to support and look after every one connected with her by blood, to the sacrifice of the love, happiness and homelife of her husband?"

"I don't know," broke down David. "Husbands don't count. Allie isn't romantic."

"An unromantic woman who permits herself to be supported by a man—who indulges in matrimony and holds him to its expense without giving him value, *all she's got!*—is about the meanest, lowest, female *cheat* in all the human order of creation!"

David made no answer. He was in no spirit to answer. He had persistently defended Allie against his own heart through eight aching years. He was—limp! And yet he had staggered along, worked along, groped along, somehow, and tried to lose his heartache in his work.

The rehabilitated Lillian—Lillian the butterfly out of the chrysalis, instead of Lill Whalen the small-town gutter grub—began rocking softly in the dark. David felt a blind impulse to utter a little cry—a moan of heartache, misery, longing for all that had been denied him, all he had paid for and not received, all which his manhood knew by instinct should be his richly—and was all a mockery and ashes in his life.

He forgot the passage of time, after the room became dark. He only sensed the bitterness of his predicament, the proximity of the ravishing girl who had descended into his scheme of things from out the skies.

"I don't know, Lillian," he deplored. "It's all a hopeless mess. I've got my side and Allie's got hers. Father's got his. So's Ma Parker. We all look at life from a different angle and act and react according to our characters. We all rise up and say the other's to blame. We each look at ourselves and see ourselves perfect. God alone knows why we do the things we do and which is blameless and which is guilty. And if I were God, I doubt if I'd punish anybody. All of us are what we are because of what we

have experienced. Allie can't help being what she is, any more than I can help being what I am. We just don't fit each other, that's all. But having got hooked up with one another somehow, it's up to us to carry on until the end. I'm limp, Lillian. I've thought and reasoned until I'm heart-sick. I could get mad and knock my relatives around. I could turn them adrift and make Allie come and live with me and do the things that all the rest of you call her duty. But she wouldn't get any more satisfaction out of caring for me alone than I'd get — knowing I'd broken up her family for my own personal selfishness — because I'm sick of living in a furnished room. We're all poor nuts and happiness has passed us by. Maybe down some far year we'll get a slant at ourselves in perspective. Then it'll probably be too late to do the right thing and apply the right remedy. I'm tired and sick of everything, God knows. I'm just worked out, played out, tired out. But I can't stop struggling because, if I did, a lot of innocent people would suffer. Maybe I lack backbone. Maybe I'm flabby. Maybe I have got too much of a judicial temperament and that's the trouble — reasoning out people's motives and making allowances. But I'm in the box and there's as much unhappiness in smashing a way out by force as there is being in it. Allie can't alter herself and come to me voluntarily and make me a home any more than I can be happy in voluntarily going back up to Paris and becoming a wage-slave in Jim Thorne's mill. We're trapped, all of us — trapped! Trapped by what we've made ourselves while growing. Trapped by circumstances over which we've had no control. Trapped by our queer ideas of what makes happiness according to our temperaments. And in the trap we just writhe and moan. Oh, well, let it be so. What's the use?"

"David!"

It was a little cry of remonstrance, compassion, coming from a lovely woman's lips in the dark. After a time the lad sensed that a hand had gripped his wrist — that old, old clasp he had felt long ago — years and years ago, it seemed — ages ago.

"Perhaps all you different people looking at it from the outside, can see things I can't," the man blundered onward. "Maybe you know what the remedy is and where it ought to be applied. A lot of you would probably like to apply it.

But I'm just caught and weighed down by something bigger than myself. Maybe it's too big a lump of moral responsibility. Maybe it's generosity that's really a fault. Maybe it's moral cowardice. Maybe it's the thing called *love* — that wants those we think most of to be happy in their own small ways as best they can. Anyhow, it's *got* me. It owns me. I can't escape it, though I wish that I could. I'd like to be happy myself. Perhaps I am happy but don't know it. But I'm not content. I'm miserable — with loneliness — yes, living this way — making money and only having it for a few minutes till I can get it in an envelope and drop it in a post-office slot. Just a few years back I wanted to do so much — live, travel, work, enjoy! And I'm side-tracked somehow, without knowing just how it happened."

"David!" cried that lovely woman's voice, hours later it seemed. This time came a pressure on his wrist. Her hand was very soft. "Sometimes — I'm glad — I've been through what *I* have — to teach me how to appreciate — well, *just a man like yourself!*"

"Appreciate *what?*"

"A man like you," she repeated tenderly. "I've never forgotten, David, that you were the only man I ever knew — who didn't trample on my — womanhood — who didn't look down on me and expect the worst — who wanted to lift it up to something my womanhood wasn't — that it could never be — who didn't debauch it!" This came in whispers. "I've got to go now, David. I mustn't trust myself here — I *can't*, with you talking so ——"

"Don't go on that account, Lillian. It's good somehow, to have you here ——"

"I can't tell you why I came. All the week I've been thinking, thinking. I just wanted to see you. You pulled me back, four, five, six years ago — pulled me — lifted me — up — gave me inspiration to be worthy — after that awful time I went through — when we saw each other last. You made me ashamed of myself, David. Ashamed of myself from the first. You appealed to me — something in you — your disappointment, your terror at times — I wanted suddenly to be the thing you expected me to be. I wanted you to know this. I've done what I've done, so I could sit like this with you, here in a room, and grip your wrist without being ashamed. Oh, what am I saying? David, David! — a woman

doesn't want to be looked up to. She doesn't want to be hoisted on any man's pedestal. She only wants to be loved! Remember that! *She only wants to be loved!*"

"Do you want to be loved, Lillian?" he whispered huskily.

Somehow he did not know when Lillian went. He came to himself sitting alone in that room in the dark. He might have dreamed that the beautiful girl had occupied the chair at his left. His head was whirling and he wondered again if he were on the edge of illness. And he could not be ill. Illness would stop him from earning money. And he had to earn money. How would Allie and the girls—and the relatives—live if he didn't? Ruthy was married, he remembered. She had a husband to pay her bills now. That was a blessing. What ailed him, anyhow?

He arose on stiffened limbs and groped his way around the rocker. He scratched a match and held it before the cheap alarm clock. Twelve-thirty! Had he been asleep?

He crossed to his rumpled bed and fell upon it. In a disordered dream he thought he saw Lill Whalen above him in an airplane, floating, drifting, ascending, descending—but always just out of his reach. She held out her arms to him whenever she passed him. But he could not rise up. The plane eluded him. So did its passenger.

That was his bitterness. The plane eluded him and so did its passenger.

CHAPTER VI

OTHER COMPLEXES

He did not become ill. Nothing more serious ailed him than temporary mental exhaustion. So he had only confused dreams that night, slept through the long hours in his clothes and returned to semi-drugged consciousness with the presentiment that Lillian had returned, was standing at the foot of his bed, was shaking it to waken him.

He sat up and blinked at her stupidly. Her face was blackened ludicrously, her tawny hair had been inked and curled, a soiled gingham house dress had taken the place of the georgette frock. But when she spoke, it came to him that it was Myra and she was holding a yellow envelope in hands wet with soapsuds.

"Tellygram fo' you, Misto' Haskell. De boy am waitin' downstaiahs. An he says it's two dollahs an' ten cents, collec'."

David glanced across at the clock. It was a quarter after seven. He arose on stiffened legs and felt in his pockets for money. He gave Myra a five-dollar note and while she was gone to settle with the boy, he ripped the sleazy envelope. He read:

Ruth in terrible trouble down in Baltimore. Just wired mother night-letter she and husband have been arrested. Something concerning a check. Mother wants to catch noon train for New York. Going down to bring Ruthy home. Wire me hundred dollars her expenses and price of three fares back. You have been three weeks behind with my allowance anyhow. Mother would have had her own money for expenses if she had not loaned all she had to me for household expenses. This is urgent. Must have money or will have sick woman on my hands. If you have not the hundred then borrow it. Wish you would come up. Want to talk with you.

ALICE.

"Here am yo' change, Misto Haskell. Ain't no bad news, am it? Ah got a tellygram once. Mah brudder was suddenly hung down to Richmon'."

"N-N-No! Just a wire from my wife wanting a lot of money—that I can't give her." He did not mean to make a confidant of the colored girl. Mechanically he voiced his thoughts. "That five-dollar note had to last me till Saturday."

"What am dat money on de table?"

"What table?" But he had followed the negress' gaze and now his eyes opened wide.

On a cleared space on his desk, atop the newly typed pages of "How's The Family?" was a sheaf of bank notes weighted down with an ink bottle. Had the servant not seen them also, he would have believed them delusion.

He crossed over and picked up the currency in fingers that trembled. "How—did this come here?"

"Fo' de Lord! Think *Ah* put it there, maybe?"

Dumfounded, Dave counted the bank notes—one hundred and fourteen dollars.

"Sort of—manna from heaven," he laughed unsteadily as he held the money in one hand, the telegram in the other.

The girl withdrew. For fifteen minutes Dave sat there thinking. His stomach felt disordered; an acrid taste was in his mouth.

Why should he—David—take Lillian's money because Ruthy had wedded a smooth-fingered mandolin player? What business was it of David's how a strange fellow financed his honeymoon? And yet he was not insensible to what the reaction of such intelligence must have been on Mother Parker.

Allie would have a sick woman on her hands, indeed. Which would mean more expense up in Paris—and in the end a forced sending for Ruthy, anyhow. Better to bring Ruthy home at once and have it done with. Perhaps at home with her mother, after such an experience, the girl might listen to reason in future.

He arose at length, splashed his face in cold water, combed his hair, went out to the telegraph office. "Fourteen dollars left for myself," he thought. "That means I can eat at a restaurant this week—every day till pay night."

Yet immediately the money was despatched, he felt unmanly. Somehow he had not played fair with Lillian. Would she have reimbursed him had she known the funds were going promptly to a headstrong, butterfly person in legal toils

in Maryland? Dave felt she would not and felt cheaply guilty of a dereliction.

A breakfast helped him somewhat and he came from the restaurant determined that as soon as possible he would save up the money and make Lillian take it back. But during that day, as he worked at his desk, helped with the Sunday lay-out, did several long articles, later went forth in search of photographs, he had a weird, poignant distress in the back of his brain each time that he thought of Lillian — as stalks in the background of sleep after a bankruptcy or the death of a loved one.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed that evening, as he resumed his work on his play, "now is one of the times when I'd almost relish a drink out of that half-filled rye bottle I took away from Bugs Hinkle that night. Wonder whatever become of it? Must be Myra lifted it. And yet Bella said she was the soul of honor."

CHAPTER VII

"HOW'S THE FAMILY?"

Spicy days of autumn ensued. The foliage grew tired of too much blowing in the heated winds of summer and turned a listless brown. The air became winelike; the Connecticut Valley lay swathed in gentle, dreamy haze. He went out to Wilbraham one Sunday on an assignment and beheld ladders against a thousand apple trees, the ozone seductive with the zestful fragrance of the fruit. Coming home later in the evening, he saw front-yard plants covered with linen cloths to ward off nocturnal frost.

Allie wrote him interminable letters while his play was going together. "Bugs" Hinkle had "overdrawn" his bank account on his wedding journey—it might happen to any one, Allie wrote; in fact, in times and past seasons in Wickford, Allie asked him to kindly remember, he — David — had often overdrawn his bank account and short-suited the family in consequence — but the check coming back protested, the Maryland hotel people had rigorously refused to pardon the dereliction and Bugs had done brief durance vile.

Ruthy's wedding trip was ruined, of course, and the shock had nearly killed her. But David must remember that ruined honeymoons ran in the Parker family; Mother Parker herself had not escaped; as a horse had run away when she and Little Hank were made one and wrecked a grocer's window.

Ruthy was at home and would ultimately have a baby. Her husband had "found something to do" in the Process Works and the couple was residing temporarily in The Ark till they acquired the money for a home of their own. Meanwhile Ruthy, in a delicate condition, was totally unable to do any work and thus threw the burden of herself and husband on to Alice and Ma Parker.

"Bugs" Hinkle had developed a petulant streak and "talked to poor Ruthy something awful," but they had to be "nice" to him or he wouldn't pay any board.

Pa Haskell was enjoying the best of poor health and his

joints gave him constant trouble. He quarreled with Bugs over the slightest little thing and Allie's life was far from being a bed of roses. He had subscribed to two copies of the *Telegraph* to be sent nightly to The Ark, so the one former copy wouldn't be torn apart when he snatched it from Bugs' fingers on delivery, if the latter happened to come home early, when the paper was desired by both. And would David please remember to make his next remittance as large as possible as along with Pa's suit, mother must have some winter clothes and the twins were perfect nightmares on frocks.

Willie had quit his job at the Paris Garage after some sort of fight with Will Pease, the proprietor. He was drawing fifteen dollars a week now, driving a limousine for John Stevens who owned the Process Works, but he didn't know how long he would remain, the Stevens family having prohibited him using the car for his own purposes and fifteen dollars not being enough these days on which to marry; he was seriously considering wedding the Pumpton girl and taking her to Havana on a honeymoon.

Mother Parker was the same dear old soul she had always been, long-suffering, never-complaining, always wishing the best for her children and working her fingers to skin and bone to help them get ahead. She was sorry Ruthy had married so young; if she had only waited a few years, she might have done far better. But after all, love was everything, wasn't it, and shouldn't little birdies in a nest agree?

Rosy was rarely mentioned in this connubial correspondence. Yet David gathered she was still in the background, doing the heavy work and making scandalous sums of money with her broilers which she resolutely refused to "loan" the remaining members of the family under any provocation whatsoever. The Lord only knew what she expected to do with her fowl-gotten gains and after all the family had done for her, it was rank ingratitude. Rosy seemed to hold that the heavy work she performed in The Ark was ample compensation for her meals and sleeping chamber and as a whole the family impressed her as being a lot of squabblers and spongers and if they wanted any money, let them get out and rustle their own.

Ultimately Allie hoped and prayed that David would get over his "insanity" and return to the bosom of his loved

ones. There were all kinds of jobs open at the mill — what with heavy war orders for Europe and so on — and he might make as high as thirty dollars a week, even if Allie knew writing *was* his forte. Yet after all, what was one's forte as against enjoying one's family while one had a family? She wrote that she had about made up her mind she had married a man who was not domestic and if in after years the girls went wrong, he would have no one to blame but himself after the way he had shelved his responsibilities and deserted all of them.

Of course David must be having the time of his life down there in Springfield. Grace Carter had come back from a week-end in Massachusetts and reported she had seen him walking of a Sunday afternoon in Forest Park with a woman "dressed fit to kill" and who much resembled the girl who used to sponge on the Thornes. Of course Allie couldn't help this; it was something one had to endure when one's husband had neglected his home and poor hard-working wife, whom he had faithfully promised before God to take for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, so long as they both should live. Still, he might conduct himself with a little more circumspection. All sorts of Paris people journeyed back and forth to Springfield constantly. She hoped, of course, David had been man enough to remind the chit he was married but she doubted it. Or, even if he had, "that kind" usually cared little or nothing for the sacred vows of matrimony and "breaking up a home" these days.

Reams and reams of this stuff — always ending with the wail for clothes for the youngsters and furniture for the house, instalments on the piano and taxes on the place, clothing for the parents and dishes for the table. Through that autumn and well on toward Christmas, Monday never failed to bring its weekly indictment. David began merely skimming through them after a time. Often they lay a couple of days on his desk without opening.

Meanwhile, he finished his play, read it, decided it asinine, tossed it aside. He had worked off his spleen on the family, that was all. Comic, parts of it were. On the whole it was tragic. Then came Christmas and a letter from Allie; couldn't he make a special effort to come up while The Family had a "tree"?

Nothing intrigues a father of a large family like the

prospect of Christmas with slathers of useless gifts for relatives — especially if he be working on a salary which every week is consumed as fast as acquired. David wrote Allie he would try to get off some extra feature stories for one of the Boston papers and thus put himself in Christmas funds, but as for coming up, he believed he would pass a better Christmas quietly by himself though he couldn't hope to make Allie understand why.

Allie wrote back that as for the Boston Sunday stories, if he could make extra money that way, why hadn't he thought of it before? As for making her understand his position, he had never showed he especially cared for her sympathy so why should she give it? She had provided a home for him and his fussy old father who was getting to be a confounded nuisance. She had given him two babies and God knows she had suffered for them, and all the gratitude he showed was going off to a strange city without them — leaving them to get along as best they were able, sending them back only such parts of his earnings as the law would make him if Allie chose to invoke it. Why should she show sympathy and try to help him indeed — a man that wasn't at all domestic and was running around Springfield "with another woman"? Did he take her for a fool?

So, he planned to spend Christmas Day working at the office and trying to anæsthetize the ache in his heart. But Christmas Eve developed a fine, soft snowfall. Springfield was covered with a mantle of mystic, Yuletide white. He came out of the office at four-thirty, was jostled by the heavy throng of last-minute shoppers, heard the jingling hand bells of Salvation Army Kris-Kringles on corners, almost cried aloud at the homely spirit of good will and social fellowship evinced on every hand, walked far down Main Street toward Forest Park.

Fathers and mothers were rushing mysterious packages from street cars into front doors, children were dragging in Christmas trees, holly wreaths were everywhere in windows, warm homelights glowed like molten amber out on the whitened lawns as darkness smothered down. And he had no part in it, anywhere.

He regretted he had not gone home to Paris. Bad as The Family might have affected him, hectic as their daily life might have been, at least he would have had companionship.

At half-past six he could stand it no longer. He could catch the seven o'clock train that came up from New York and halted at Paris at four in the morning.

He caught a trolley back to the business section and alighted at Lyman Street. A few minutes later, without stopping to pack anything in his room — indeed, what had he worth packing? — he gained the Union Station. The New York train was late — delayed by Christmas travel. After a half-hour wait a mystic head lamp gleamed through thickening snowflakes and up into the station pulled a double-header train of Pullmans — two locomotives necessary for the Connecticut Valley grade. And immediately the long train had stopped, the surging throng became a stampede.

Fight his way through the mob of frantic mothers and excited children he could not. He suffered the crush to mill him around and finally brought up near a bootblack's stand by the wall.

And then he saw Lillian!

She was quite abreast of him — an erect, regal figure in a heavy coat of brown fox. She wore a veil over her turban hat; it fell over her shoulders, somewhat hiding her face. Her black-gloved hands held packages in holly paper — and a cluster of roses. Roses! In a snowfall! She was instructing a red cap about her bags.

"Lillian!" cried David — thickly, impulsively.

She turned with a start. Then her strong face lighted; her sea-green eyes grew wide.

"*David!*" she cried above the turmoil all around them, regardless of who heard, dropping all her armful but the flowers. She hugged him.

That is, David sensed the impulsive embrace of two wonderful arms about him, a delirium of exotic perfume in his nostrils, a marvelous woman standing brazenly on tiptoe to reach his lips, the scratch of a hatpin across his left ear. And he heard her saying, "How did you know I was coming up to spend Christmas with you?"

"— didn't." But within him his emotions were in chaos. It was an overwhelming, exhilarating chaos. It was Christmas Eve and on that incoming train had been some one who cared — for *him*! He recovered her packages in a daze.

"My stars!" went on Lillian. "What were you doing up here at the station? I didn't have time to send you a wire."

"Wishing there were some one on that train — for me," he said, half truthfully. "You mean — you've come up here to Springfield for no other reason than to see *myself*?"

"Oh, you stupid man! Why haven't you answered my letters?"

"I haven't received but two or three. I responded the best I was able." He had not quite assimilated that this ravishing girl, cheeks aglow with health, tawny hair escaping over her eyes where her hat had been skewed, pretty ankles showing beneath the fur coat — had made the trip from New York on purpose to be his holiday guest.

"Stop that porter! Make him put my bags in a cab. Let's go to the Kimball. I declare I'm half starved."

"I can't go there in these clothes!"

"They're respectable, aren't they? I declare, you sound like a silly old married *woman*." She thrust her arm through his and squeezed it against her body as they hurried after the red cap. "Oh, David, I'm so glad to see you! I've been eating out my heart down there in the city, wondering how things were going with you. Have you finished the play?"

Instructions to the porter precluded a discussion of the play's progress for the moment. They secured a cab. The man had been knocked off his balance by this swift sequence of the woman's arrival. He was halfway up Chestnut Street before it dawned upon him that in his hand was a ticket for Paris.

"You'll think I'm perfectly terrible, won't you, carrying on like this? But I'm so happy to see you — right at the station to meet me and everything — I'm just like a silly girl. Besides, it's Christmas, anyhow. Are you still alone in the city?"

"Yes," he told her. He had a little heart pinch at the thought of Carrie who had left that noon for Vermont.

"We're all alone together here in this great big city with a regular Christmas before us?"

"I suppose so."

"My, but won't we have fun!"

David was not so certain how much fun *he* would have. If he must "entertain" this disturbing specimen of the well-known sex, he was in for a dour time financially.

"You look worried," the girl chattered on. "What's the matter? Am I not welcome?"

"Oh, yes. The good Lord knows you're welcome enough!"

"Look here. Are you worried about money, as usual? Is that what ails you?"

"I'm not — broke."

"I'll bet you're mighty near it. Sent all your small change home to your folks for Christmas? Forget it, David! I had some shares of Bethlehem Steel. They went up ten points this week and I sold. We'll squander the profits together."

"I haven't forgotten I'm already indebted to you for a hundred and fourteen dollars."

"Fiddle-dee-dee! Speak about it again and I'll leave for New York by the first train back. I owed you that money. I owe you a whole lot more than *that money*! David, you poor, dear, lovable, long-suffering goofus — make my Christmas happy by letting me play Santa Claus."

She was first from the taxi, paid the driver and strode up into the hotel — a picture from a winter fashion plate. A trio of bellhops came running at sight of her.

"Come upstairs!" she invited David, after registering. "You *must*! From now until I start back, the forbidden word 'No' can't pass your lips. We'll order dinner sent up to my suite." And gathering up her gloves, packages, flowers, *et al.*, she followed the bellhops to the elevators. David brought up the rear, feeling somewhat foolish, walking in a semi-dream. "Take off your coat," she ordered, a few moments later. "And while I'm changing, call the Room Service for a menu." She shed the fur coat and pulled off her hat. Her tawny hair had been marceled. The lights glinted in it like synthetic sunshine on tiny waves of molten amber.

David did as directed, then paced the apartment — hands deep in his pockets. Lill's vitality reacted on him strangely. She was a radiant, irresistible, physical force that he could neither encompass nor control. Contact with it brought almost as much dismay as exhilaration. Dismay is not the proper word, perhaps. Uneasiness might better describe his feelings — anticipation of contact with an elusive Something that carried both delight and dread.

He stood a long time by the window, thinking, while the girl moved about in the adjoining room. Instincts told him she was exactly the tonic his jaded heart strings required in

that year and season. Yet he was not considering her in terms of his instincts. He was considering Lillian as a problem in ethics and wondered if therein she was not equally as appealing to him as through the personal magnetism she had acquired along with her metropolitan self-confidence and sophistication.

And then — there was another Something which drew him toward Jeek Whalen's paradoxical daughter that had nothing to do with precocity. It was intimacy — the toughest and the tenderest bond which may bind a man to a woman or a woman to a man. He "knew all about" Lillian. Lillian knew that he "knew all about her" and yet on a Christmas season she preferred his society to any other.

He had known Lillian on the social ash heap. He had attended on her in life's major privacy. He had beheld her at her worst. Attaining now toward the summits of life, his knowledge was an open sesame to most of the minor privacies of these better days of the happier present and still more promising future.

She came from the inner room finally in a turquoise blue garment, half kimono, half frock, that brought out the proportions of her well-matured figure. It had a thin trimming of moleskin at collar and sleeves, the latter leaving her forearms bare. She was tying a girdle at her left hip as she confronted him with the sea-green eyes in which laughter lurked seductively.

"Well," she cried, grasping him by the shoulders and shaking him playfully, "we're alone together *and you're not at all frightened*. Who is responsible — you or myself?"

A waiter, arriving with a dinner menu, interrupted his reply. For which he was grateful, as it might have been asinine. Lill chose their dinner with the delight of an epicure. Then she pulled the bewildered man across to a divan.

"Tell me everything!" she ordered, seating him, dropping a cushion for herself at his feet. "Your work, your prospects, especially your play. I've thought a lot about that play. Before I leave I'm going to make you read it."

"It isn't worth reading, Lill."

"You've finished it, I think you wrote."

"And shoved it in my trunk along with more rubbish."

"It was about a cowboy and some girls in a boarding-school, you said."

"I told you a little white fib, Lillian. It wasn't about a cowboy. It was about a family — an average New England family — and a fellow like myself who found he had to support the lot —"

She drew away from his knees and sat very straight. "You mean — you've dramatized your relatives?"

"Something along that order, I suppose. I told you the 'story' about the cowboy because I was sensitive over the fix in which I'd become involved. Yes, I've dramatized the family. And it's too darned tragic to be entertaining."

"How do you know? You're not the public. Tell me about the plot."

But he did not want to talk about himself; he wanted to talk about the dynamic woman at his feet. He was glad when their dinner arrived though not because he was hungry.

"You *eat!*" ordered Lillian. "I know what ails you, David Haskell. It's the way you're living —"

"I didn't realize there was anything that ailed me —"

"You didn't? I declare, it's time some one took you in hand. You're a — a — domestic derelict!" Yet her eyes grew soft as she watched his features. "My stars, I wish I had you down to New York!"

"What would you do?"

"What wouldn't I do? See that some one took care of you properly — or do it myself. Make you eat and sleep regularly. Compel you to walk, swim, ride, play. Make you stop so much coffee and so many cigars. Give you back your nerves. Not your nerve. *Nerves!* How old are you, Davie?"

"I'll be twenty-nine in June."

"And did you know you've got as much gray in your hair as a man of forty?"

"That doesn't signify anything. Father had gray hair at —"

"It signifies everything. You're not living, poor fellow. You're only existing — the same as I only existed up to the time the Mannings took me away from Vermont. You need the same sort of chance, dear boy. That day I plagued you so in the lunch room you had the complexion of a schoolgirl. Right now —" but she did not qualify "right now." Her intuition that she might hurt him, stopped her.

"You don't expect me to stay a beardless kid forever?"

"You're what I called you a minute ago. A domestic dere-lict. All you need, poor David, is a *wife*!"

"I've got a wife!"

"Like fun you've got a wife! What do you think a wife is, David?"

"The woman a man marries, of course."

"I thought so!" She said it like a lament and sat quietly staring at him, her chin slightly lowered.

He started to remonstrate but she stopped him with a gesture of the napkin. "Oh, I know women! You don't need to turn feminist in their defense. You're a ragged example of what a blowzy, shiftless, selfish lot they are—the run of them."

"But if wifehood isn't—what is it?"

"It dawns on a few it might be a career. After living two years around Dorothy Manning, I'm inclined to be one of them."

"A career!" Again his wry smile. "Good heavens, are you *that* old-fashioned?"

"I may be a blamed sight newer fashioned than it's possible for the average woman to-day to conceive."

"Please, Lillian. Don't!"

"Bother your 'please don'ts'! It's time that some one with sense and courage took you in hand with a few please do's. I'm a woman myself and yet I hate women! I hate all of them—except a few like Dorothy. And she's not a woman. She's a *wife*!"

"The change in you!" he exclaimed.

"Sometimes I feel as though I'd squeezed forty or fifty years into my twenty-six." And she added grimly, "I think you know the reason why."

Hours and hours later—at least it seemed so—he found himself standing at one of the windows, hands behind his back, staring out over Springfield, heavily spread with a blanket of the snow. The sea-green eyes were regarding him intently from the divan behind him. It was Christmas Eve. Would he ever forget that Christmas Eve?

He had felt strangely alone in the world up to now—somehow there was nobody to really care for him in a way that he *felt*—in a way that elicited hot response—except this girl who had truly been the opportunist—who had "been washed by strong currents on strange shores and was

building herself a palace of the soul from the driftwood she was finding along the beaches of infinity." They two were alone — alone this quiet Christmas Eve with bitter pasts behind them — and the girl's far more bitter than the man's, if she chose to consider it.

"Perhaps you're right, Lill." He said it huskily. The bond between himself and this girl was growing stronger. It terrified him and yet he liked it. He started back down the room, his eyes on the rug.

She arose suddenly from her place and confronted him. He stopped to keep himself from colliding with her. Again she laid her hands on his shoulders. But they did not stop there. They went on up and the fingers of her shapely hands were clasped behind his head. The mole-trimmed sleeves fell away from her arms. Her face was upturned. As faint as the brush of a feather, he felt her breath on his cheek — mingling with his — sweet-scented like all her glorious, dynamic body.

"David," she said calmly, "I've *lived*. You know I have lived — and why. And I'm living now. I'm going on living. But one thing life has taught me. Yours may not be the brand of courage that scales the heights, but it sometimes takes more courage to plow through mud when no other road is open."

"Please, Lillian!"

"— and no matter what I may say about my own worthless sex — I guess — I'm a woman at heart!"

"Don't!"

"You respected my womanhood — my sex — its possibilities to be the right sort of woman — before I'd learned to respect them myself. I'm wise enough, I hope, to know that nothing I can do can get you out of your dilemma; you've got to go about it in your own time and way. And be satisfied in your own heart when the ordeal is finished. But it's only fair to you — the biggest and the best Christmas gift in my power to give you — to say that if there is any change in me which you mentioned, *you have been responsible, solely and utterly — and no other person!* You've stood for something sturdy and clean *and I had to measure up!*"

He waited till he could trust himself and then said whimsically, "And I'm only a poor simp who can solve everybody's troubles but his own!"

But as he stood so, a mist seemed to rise before his eyes. He felt suddenly dizzy — not the vertigo of nausea — more like the transport of alcoholic intoxication. His heart pounded mightily — great beats that bumped his ribs. The strength in his legs ran out. Came an alarming sensation, a constriction, across his forehead and chest.

And the next instant he had his arms about Lillian Whalen! He had crushed her body against his own. Married or not, benedict or bachelor, saint or sinner, she was locked against him in a grip of iron.

A gasp. "Davie — don't! — you're hurting me, David!" No matter! He wanted to hurt her. He wanted to make her suffer, not to pay any score against women but because he was male. He crushed her with savagery. He almost broke her back. His mouth found her lips, her cheek, the curve of her naked shoulder.

She made no effort to fight away. She adjusted her posture to his, closed her eyes mutely, and her knees sagged against his own. David came from this lawless abandonment of passion with a start.

"Good God! What am I doing? *What have I done?*"

He held her off and stared incredulously. Her eyes were still closed. On her features was the trace of a smile.

"Lillian!" he groaned.

She did not reply at once. Her eyes remained closed; that smile persisted. She could not have fainted — because her tongue came out like a tiny red dart and whetted her lips. Again a shudder went over her. Life and strength seemed returning.

"Lillian! What have I done? I was mad!"

Her eyes came open then with an effort. She dropped one arm, turned her head and tried to see the bruise he had blindly, passionately inflicted. Her knees seemed still weak; her posture still sagged.

"What have I done?" he cried again, aghast.

Lillian laughed audibly. "Branded me, I suppose. Given me a Christmas present."

"I've — hurt — you! And I never hurt a woman before in my life!"

"Hurt me? Have you? Do it on the other shoulder, David. I'm not so sure I don't like it!"

CHAPTER VIII

CASTLES IN VERMONT

There had been blind rebellion in it, that episode in the hotel room — some lust, perhaps — an instinctive impulse to cut the Gordian knot of his troubles and appropriate such exquisite feminine flesh as had offered itself for his pseudo-brutality. The man was angry with himself for allowing the leash of his self-control to slip, angrier with life which proffered him such delectable fruit and then balked him with a No Trespass sign shoved abruptly before him — and fully determined that in some dramatic, spectacular way he would do penance to the world and give adequate compensation to some one, sometime, somehow, mostly meaning Allie, The Family and his conscience.

So I record that David went back to Vernon Street that night feeling as though he had committed the unpardonable sin and was forever cast out from eternal grace. He was stained with pitch from the bottomless pit and he tossed all night on an unmade bed, passed Christmas morning in a bad funk, counted the hours to one o'clock, pressed his own trousers with a flatiron borrowed from Myra and presented himself at the hotel suite later in the afternoon with a block of manuscript beneath his arm, a forlorn expression about his mouth, and chagrin in his eyes.

He was received by a soft-voiced, softer-eyed woman in a gray-toned frock — found himself resuming the prior nights' intimacies without embarrassment, eventually read his play and left again around eleven o'clock with the cast-iron presentiment that he was beyond salvation and the whitest thing he could do — in justice to Allie, the twins, the Puritanic fathers and society in general — was to keep on through Vernon Street to the river, find a hole in the ice — or chop one if necessary — plop in head-first and be hauled out in April a bloated Something that could only be identified by the clothing manufacturer's label in an inside coat pocket.

Yet he did not track down to the Connecticut; he chopped no holes in any ice; he was not hauled out in April as Exhibit A for a two weeks' journalistic sensation. He went six times to Lillian's suite that Christmas week, took her out to four dinners, attended three theaters and kissed her brazenly in the dull gray chill of a clammy winter's morning when she finally came to entrain for the return trip to Manhattan. Whereupon he returned to his newspaper job, appreciating perfectly he was a yellow cad who ought to be gunned on sight — and did better work than he had offered his employers since his arrival three years before, from Vermont.

This being merely light biography of a representative young American's vicissitudes with his relatives, it is far more fitting to turn awhile and consider those relatives — not as they passed a noisy quarrelsome Yuletide among themselves, but as they behaved and reacted in the winter and the spring which followed, and particularly as "Bugs" Hinkle deported himself one evening in March when upon buying his weekly theatrical paper in Joe Service's news room he turned its pages after supper and came suddenly upon an item which riveted Ruth's husband to stone — shale, let us say, not marble, because Ruthy's personal husband was not composed of very hard stuff.

"Bugs," it might be said in passing, was as much of an enigma to The Family as he had already become a searing disappointment to his wife. Physically he was a soft, spongy, egg-shaped little fellow of thirty-four with a bald spot as big as a saucer, bulging blue eyes, a rather loose mouth and inadequate chin — a woman's chin, what there was of it. And feet!

Temperamentally he was rattle-headed, given to tempers, moods, whimsicalities, funks. He was always starting for nowhere and stopping before he got there. Originally the only son of a prominent horse-collar manufacturer somewhere out in Indiana, he had enjoyed too much money before his majority and too little of it afterward.

The equine haberdasher, the family money and "Bugs" had all vanished out of Indiana in about the same year — the first two by natural causes and processes, the last by virtue of running down an aged Scotchman with his motor-

cycle and immediately having a vivid intuition that he might not successfully explain the mishap to a jury.

A minstrel troupe having played in the place the week of the accident, "Bugs" had somehow ingratiated himself and traveled east with it. His peculiar feet—which always looked broken without being actually deformed—had won him a season's engagement as a grotesque dancer. Whereupon "Bugs" styled himself as an "actor," learned to play the mandolin, saxophone and sweet potato, wear an importance greater than his physical weight, exist on borrowed money, address most women with, "Oh, look who's here!" haunt booking agencies, get drunk, consider that in comedy films he would be a knock-out, spend his spare time figuring out how he could live without work on a hundred thousand dollars, dodge his landlady, buy racing tips, dress in "attractive checks," wonder a dozen times a week why he didn't have the nerve to shoot himself, and buttonhole his more prosperous acquaintances with grand schemes for "cleaning up" on small investments that promised big returns.

Just why she had "fallen" for him, Ruthy had never quite figured out. From his clothing—he always dressed immaculately—cerise tie, purple socks, heavy watch-fob on his left-hand coat lapel from which his watch chain disappeared in his upper breast pocket—she had accepted him as fastidious and not at all a "pill" like David.

From his easy spending (before matrimony), his beautiful ear for popular ballads of the day, his constant references to many deals where he was shortly to "clean up," she had accepted him as possessing all the desirable attributes for a husband after her heart. And when he took her out of a Sunday in chamois gloves and later introduced her romance-jaded soul to moonlight mandolin music in a canoe on Lake Lorraine, his conquest was complete.

Not that Bugs expected to make a conquest, at least so quickly. In fact, the fellow was a trifle stunned at the celerity with which it came. But something in Ruthy's eye warned him it might not be exactly healthy to fail in the obligations he had assumed toward her. Anyhow, she was bewilderingly beautiful that summer and he had no reason to doubt her sincerity in references to "the funeral he would have on his hands if he didn't do the right thing." So he

had borrowed fifty dollars and started for Baltimore, the rest being history.

That he was subsequently to become the father of progeny nettled Bugs almost as much as it bewildered him. Yet he had never given up the obsession that in vaudeville or movies he was yet to "clean up." He billed hard-rubber articles to New York and Chicago jobbers at the Process Works while religiously keeping tab on his chosen profession in the theatrical papers and "if it was a girl" had already prepared to turn up some morning as not having slept in his bed through the night.

So when this spongy young spotlight artist, whose worth an entertainment-jaded nation had yet to recognize, came upon that article one March night in *Variety*, he gave the profane exclamation: "*Gawd!*" and dropped his slipped feet to the rug.

Pa Haskell — sitting opposite and nursing a standing grudge because Bugs invariably secured that side of the table whereon the reading radiance fell via the left shoulder — looked across dourly over twisted glasses.

"What ails you?" demanded Ruthy, for once in her life being compelled to apply herself with her needle in preparation for the expected new arrival.

"This now David of yours!" gasped Bugs. "He's went and put something over. Or at least a feller with the same kind of name!"

Allie, washing the evening dishes at the kitchen sink, overheard his exclamation, stood rigid a moment, then slipped the soapsuds off her hands. She entered swiftly.

"David, you say? What about him?"

"A feller *named* David, anyhow. David Haskell. Gonna have a play produced. By — Thornton Starring!" Ruthy's husband said this last in a lowered tone, awesomely. It was like speaking of the Deity.

"Read it," commanded Ruthy. "Aloud!"

Bugs complied. His eyes seemed bulged till they might almost burst and run down his cheeks:

"How's The Family?", a new three-act comedy by David Haskell and Avery Harmsworth, will be put into rehearsal this coming summer by Max Brunnell and Thornton Starring, co-authors and producers of that highly successful comedy of last

season, "Get the Money." The new offering, which will probably go into The Alhambra in the fall, as the producers have a five-year lease on the house, will feature John Colfax Colby and Clara Hope Benedict.

The play is said to be a highly delightful comedy-satire on modern American family life in the upper middle classes, delineating the dilemmas and complexes encountered by a struggling young architect trying to support numerous dependents fostered on him by a thoughtless bride. Rehearsals will begin as soon as the balance of the cast is completed. It is rumored that Zelda Steers will be given an inimitable character rôle in the production, that of the constantly misunderstood mother-in-law, if negotiations now pending with the Schumanns are successful. Complete cast will be given out later.

The members of the Parker-Haskell family looked at each other blankly. Mother Parker was summoned downstairs. She read the item—holding the periodical low beneath the round green shade of the reading light. Even Rosy Trotter was advised and her sepulchral opinion sought as to the probability of this being the prodigal of their collective bosoms.

"Dunno!—why not?" responded Rosy, who frequently confounded society by her phlegmatic utterances of abrupt common sense. "Got family enough here to write dozen plays about, ain't he?" And she went on stoically kneading her bread.

A stunned silence followed. The paper had to be passed around for each to read. Mother Parker pulled off her spectacles with the faint murmur that she hoped it was their David because it might mean he was truly succeeding at last, went back and sat down on an article of furniture that in other years had been the memorable sofa of the Parker kitchen, "in the dear old home now gone forever."

Pa Haskell read the "piece" and merely grunted, applying himself at once to his *Telegraph*. To him all drama was "play-actin'" not far removed in prestige from Drama's human representative in the family bosom. Allie stood pursing her lips and chewing at the inside of her right cheek, eyes glittering queerly. Ruthy at length handed the dynamic announcement back to her husband with a contemptuous little sniff and snatched up her baby clothes as though *they* and not the theatrical weekly, had somehow offended. Bugs,

who had been waiting to receive it back with popping eyes fixed on sightless distance, remarked from his vasty chest of professional knowledge:

"I suppose you know — if it's *your* David — and he's really had a play accepted by some hocus-pocus — and it's a *go* — he stands to make a rotten lot o' jack?"

"A rotten lot of jack? How much?"

"Huh! They's plays that have cleaned up millions. Look at 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'!"

"You mean — for the playwright?"

"Yes, for the playwright. I was talkin' to George Broadstairs just before comin' up to Springfield last spring. 'Georgie,' says I, 'how much did you really make off "The Lion and the Net"?' Know how much he told me?"

"N-N-No. How much?"

"'Hink,' says he, 'just between ourselves, I'll clean up a cool four hundred thousand before the run's ended — road shows and all.' Fact!"

Allie felt herself turning delicately faint. Ruth stopped her sewing. Pa Haskell jerked his head. Ma Parker dropped her jaw and let her mouth form a small, pathetic "o."

"You mean — plays make as much as that?"

"Ever hear of a successful playwright that was broke?" Bugs hitched in his chair and smiled a smile of such condescension that the new intelligence took the aspect of shattering shock.

"And David — if he's somehow written such a play — might stand to make — ?" Allie couldn't go on.

"Coupla hundred thousand. Sure! Why not?"

"The devil you say!" gasped Pa Haskell. He was interested at last, leaning forward with one hairy forearm along the table.

Bugs began to swell. In matters such as this, his judgment was beyond dispute. "Maybe you think I'm lyin'? Do you think I'd lie about another member of this family's good luck — when mine's so *rotten*?"

This was a clincher. The atmosphere was tense. Allie groped blindly for something in the furniture line that would ease the load on her feet.

"Maybe," whispered Ruthy in hollow voice, "maybe — we stand — to be rich — at last!"

That was the consensus of opinion in every breast beneath that roof. All but Rosy and Willie. Rosy considered she had quite a financial edge on David already — with the prices that pullets were bringing that spring. As for Willie — well, Willie came in while the general transfixation was tightest.

"What's the matter?" he demanded from the door to the hall. "Anybody dead?"

"David's — just cleaned up — a couple of hundred thousand dollars," announced Ruthy, falling into her husband's verbal weakness.

"No!" gasped Willie. "How do you know? Got any of it?"

"Not yet," returned his younger sister. "But we will!" She had laid aside her sewing. The prospective possession of so much wealth seemed to react on Ruthy as though from that time forward it wouldn't even be necessary to fashion more baby clothes. "There's a piece in one of Bugs' papers to-night. Show it to him, Bugs. Willie's one of the family, I guess. He's in on it, too!"

"But this don't say Dave's *got* it yet," argued the somewhat practical Willie. "Unless they've paid him for it in advance."

"Ask Bugs. He knows all about such things." It was the first time since her marriage that Ruthy had waived her position in favor of her consort.

The minutes ticked by — one, two, three, four! Bugs capitulated for Willie's benefit. Then "Grandma" Parker voiced the general conviction. From the shadows of the sofa corner she affirmed, "Well, I'd say it was about time some such good luck came to you strugglin' young people. I declare, what you've all been through has almost bruk my heart."

Bugs arose and commenced walking the floor excitedly, hands thrust deep in his trousers. His collar was off; his vest unbuttoned. He crushed little Mildred's celluloid doll — the one that came from Santa Claus via "Grandpa" Haskell on the Christmas tree — with his foot. It hurt him, yet he did not seem to mind.

"Well, thank God!" breathed Ruthy, "I can go to a hospital decently and have my baby — without making it harder worrying about the bills."

The family neither confirmed nor denied this advantage. The domestic imagination as a whole was soaring, each pre-occupied with roseate possibilities of its own.

"Well, we'll get out of this horrible poverty, anyhow," announced Mrs. David Haskell, producing her handkerchief and blowing her nose.

"It means we can move from Paris, don't it?" discovered Willie, sinking onto the box of sitting-room stove wood and fumbling for cigarettes. "Cripes! Maybe it means we can go to New York!"

A quick exclamation from Grandma Parker. Must they really go to New York — where there were hold-ups and terrible street accidents and open resorts of gilded sin? She was silenced by the indignant Ruthy. Of course they would go to New York. New York wasn't any worse than any other place — Paris even, in proportion to the population.

Pa Haskell sensed vaguely that if they moved to New York and quitted The Ark, his position as family landlord with its attendant boarding privileges might somehow be jeopardized. He wasn't so sure about going to New York. He was getting pretty well along in years. New York might not agree with his joints. He'd heard it was damp.

"Oh, I guess you'll come along, Gramp," chafed Willie. "When you see us livin' in a swell apartment and drivin' a regular limousine — like Stevens' — I rather guess you'll come along."

"That's right," cried Ruthy, "we *can* have a limousine, can't we? My lord, we can have everything — with a couple of hundred thousand to spend! *We can even go to Europe!*" She stopped aghast at the possibilities. Then another probability dawned on her. It made her abruptly sick. "And here I am, going to have a baby!" she wailed. And she turned on her striding husband with such a look of hate that the man's blood should have chilled to ice. If they were to have a fortune thrust on them so precipitously, why couldn't they have postponed the little matter of offspring till this loving bride had enjoyed her "fling"? Now she was going to be handicapped, anchored. With a yowling infant! One didn't "tote yowling infants to Europe." Or did they?

Allie let the family anticipate. It was intoxicating — not exactly unpleasant music to her ears. Vaguely she understood that if this was David and he had sold a play and

it did make money — thereby was she vindicated at last in the aggravating little family matter of having thrown away herself and her life on a — pill!

"For heaven's sake, will you stop your crazy walking and sit down?" Ruthy caustically requested her lord and master. "What ails you, anyhow?"

"It means I can put on some shows on my own — really be a producer. *My Gawd, maybe I can break into movies at last!*" And Bugs did stop abruptly and sat down in a chair. It sapped his strength — this prospect so concrete.

Five, six, seven, eight minutes ticked away. Rosy finished her kitchen work and passed through on her way up to bed.

"Don't spend it — till you got it!" she croaked, like the ghost at a feast of imagination that she was. And not a soul in that room but hated her in that instant and wondered how on earth they had tolerated her ungainly bulk so long as they had.

"Something ought to be done about this — *quick*," advised Ruthy when the ensuing hour had exhausted their individual and collective financial muscles. "There isn't a doubt in the world but it's true. The more I think of it, the surer I am."

"What do you mean? Done?" It was Willie who questioned.

"About David. He might skip. How do we know that he wouldn't?"

"What's that?" demanded Pa Haskell. He swung around outraged. "Young lady — you are referring to *my son!*"

"Yes, and your old son skipped once, and left us all to dig for ourselves. Don't forget that!"

This confused the man somewhat and opened an old family feud in which he did not care to participate. So he glared at Ruthy. And Ruthy glared back.

"The best thing you can do, Allie," the younger sister went on swiftly, "is to hot-foot down to Springfield as quick as the Lord 'll let you. And sew things up somehow so's we don't get cheated!"

Ma Parker protested weakly. It made out David a felon in advance. And she had always liked David. He had such a nice boyish face.

"Nice, boyish faces don't pay no bills!" her youngest daughter reminded her. "With two hundred thousand dollars, David Haskell could flee to *China!* And how'd we

ever raise the cash to bring him back and get our rights?"

This *was* cause for consternation. And consternation was thereupon enjoyed by all — except Pa Haskell. He washed his hands of the whole sordid business right then and there. He said so, three or four times. But he did not go up to bed. Though his hands were washed of the whole sordid business, he stayed on, nevertheless, to ascertain how the whole sordid business came out. Besides, none of the women of the household had yet made his bed; mother and elder daughter usually went the rounds of the chambers a few moments before each member retired and performed this thankless domestic chore in pairs.

"You hear me, Allie?" urged Ruth Frances Hinkle, *née* Parker. "You ought to go down to Springfield right off — to-night — to-morrow, anyhow — and see we get what belongs to us before any other woman spends it. You know all the talk we've heard about the way your husband's been carrying on."

"That's just what I'm thinking about exactly," responded Alice with sudden grimness.

"And here I am with a baby or I'd go with you!" wailed Ruthy afresh.

"I guess I can attend to such business with my own lawful husband — alone."

"You think so, do you? I don't see any Order of Merit pinned on you for doing it in the past — according to the way we've lived and what we've had to put up with!"

"Anybody'd think to hear you talk that you'd married David along with me? What's it all your business, anyhow? You've got your own husband, haven't you?"

"Yes, but what's he worth? What can he do but play the mandolin and pass bum checks?" This pleasing little conubial side light was advanced while the husband in question was pacing up and down the floor imbued with a sudden great idea for "cleaning up" — the capital for the scheme to be supplied by David. He stopped short at his wife's contention.

"Oh, is that so, you lazy little storm and strife?"

"Children, children!" begged Mother Parker. "Little birdies in a nest should always agree!"

"Blaa!" snapped Bugs. He adjourned to the adjacent room, leaving the two sisters "having it out."

It was two o'clock in the morning before that household finally quieted — and all because Bugs Hinkle by the merest accident had found a trite little news item down in the corner of a theatrical weekly. And if any one of its members slept at all, it was the lethargy of exhaustion. Exhaustion of the imagination and the hectic responsibility of budgeting two hundred thousand dollars in such a manner that all the members of the family were reasonably represented got their quotas.

The Haskells worth two hundred thousand dollars! Think of it! What "dog" it would allow them to put on — even right there in Paris. How the "I knew 'em when" folks would rise and shine. Allie dozed off at last — a twin on either arm — planning what she would wear down to Springfield. That is, if Rosy would loan her the money for the trip. Rosy would *have* to loan her the money! If she didn't, Allie would take it, even if it meant assaulting the domestic ox and looting her crudely. Hadn't she given Rosy a home the past three years for nothing? Weren't they all one family? And if blood wasn't thicker than water, then *what* was?

But three o'clock struck and found Ruth Hinkle sobbing. Why couldn't *she* have been the one to marry David instead of big, angular, insanely domestic Allie? What did Allie know about spending two hundred thousand dollars — about dressing — about entertaining? As matters stood, with the rest of the family insisting on their portions, such part of the two hundred thousand as accrued to the Hinkles might become a mere pittance. She, Ruthy, of all the Parker females, including her mother, was the one who had really wrecked her life. And unable to endure the torture of her luckless predicament another instant, she delivered a spleenish kick at the snoring Bugs beside her.

The man arose with a violent jolt, taking half the bed-clothes with him. But when he got it through his domelike head what the assault was all about, he did not kick back. He was withheld from kicking back. His wife was in a condition which society generally regards as "interesting." One did not kick back.

CHAPTER IX

WHOM GOD HATH JOINED

Meanwhile, in New York City, David himself was encountering vast vexation, striving to assimilate what had happened to him anyhow — and exactly from what source. Day had succeeded day through January and week had followed week through February. Then one night in early March was delivered that fraught wire:

Come to New York at once. Important documents requiring your signature. Urgent.

LILLIAN.

The astounded playwright went to New York — for the first time in his life. He did not advise Lillian of his arrival and walked to her Washington Heights apartment. Feet hurting, limbs burning, scarcely dreaming any city could encompass such territory, he had finally found her street and number and been announced by the negro operator in the apartment foyer.

The surprised and delighted girl had been waiting in the hall when the lift reached her floor. The hour being long past dinner, she was spending the evening in a comfortable old blue smock, hair bound low on her neck, wide band of black silk about her temples to keep stray locks from the sea-green eyes.

"You dear old blunderer! Why didn't you let me know so I could meet you at the train?"

"Didn't want to bother you," he had answered, startled by the spectacular luxury of the apartment building, the hall, Lillian's flat — when a moment later he had entered it.

A big woman — name, Stella Wayburn — had been on the point of leaving as David was presented. Her gown made the fellow feel his provincialism, but as she immediately slipped into a heavy seal wrap and fluffed a scarf about her coiffured head, matters more personal commanded his atten-

tion. Stella was publicity expert for one of the big Broadway hotels. She was taking a Count Somebody or other to a theater that night as a part of her bread-and-butter obligations, the awards from which helped to pay for one-half this homey apartment. David had been glad when she had excused herself and gone down in the lift. She had a queer twisted smile and a bantering expression in her eyes which made the budding playwright acutely self-conscious. But once the door had closed, Lillian had faced him with a tiny shriek of delight.

"Have I got you to myself at last? Truly? Down here in wicked New York?"

"That's what it looks like, Lillian."

He had an abandoned, cut-loose feeling — a sensation of drifting toward an objective as delightful as it was *verboten*. The girl's color fanned high. Something about her face, voice, posture, begged to be taken in his arms. And yet David did not. Though she might have expressed her love for this overworked, perplexed fellow a score of times — to have forced that situation now would have been cheaply sentimental. So her face conveyed what her body could not. And David drifted — drifted like a tired swimmer who has fought savage undercurrents, been engulfed by mountainous waves, and suddenly begins to sense calmer waters, a white coral beach ahead in the sun.

No need to go into minute detail of the evening which followed, the food she had insisted on preparing for him in her white kitchenette, the hours which had fled swiftly as she sat on a cushion at his feet and recounted what had happened — how that square old theatrical producer, Thornton Starring, had at last discharged his debt by sidetracking a play by Herron Pollard to put David's comedy into production at once. She told of the financial arrangements with Miss Kramer, play broker, the contracts to be signed, the check that was waiting. Only when Lillian had suggested that he secure a bachelor apartment and a Japanese valet had he aroused himself to a realization of what the future might hold. He — David Haskell — with a valet!

"But I can't afford an apartment and a v-v-valet. All the money I have is ——"

"I said Miss Kramer has a check for you — a thousand dollars advance on your royalties. We made Starring pay

double the usual amount because of certain obligations to me. Later on there will be more."

"You've done — all this — for me? How can I ever repay you?"

"I'm the debtor, dear boy. If I lived to be a hundred and contrived to make you a multimillionaire, I couldn't half begin to settle for what your influence has been in my life! Why, David, what's the matter?"

"I don't know! Forgive me for acting like a fool! It's a new sensation — having a woman or *anyone* — do something for me!"

"Isn't it about time, don't you think, that you rested — doing things for other people — and let them do a few things for you?"

"It's just reaction, I guess! Oh — hang!"

He found his head in a corner of her shoulder, later — that soft, wonderful, fragrant shoulder on which once, in blind, asinine passion, he had put an ugly bruise. He was drifting. The waves about him were warm — and calm. The coral beach looked peacefully inviting. When would he reach it?

Lillian had gone back to the Grand Central with him later that night. She had helped him get his bags and check them into the proper hotel. Then had begun weeks in which a new world had opened — and yet a world where he found he fitted with strange facility.

He had acquired new clothes. He had met Miss Kramer — a hardened old campaigner of the theatrical world who looked like somebody's gray-haired aunt and smoked endless cigarettes held daintily in much beringed fingers. He had met Starring, Colby, Clara Hope Benedict. The old, old stagefright of Jim Thorne's office when he had gone to interview a wrathful Fish and Game president had gripped him mercilessly at first — until he had learned that all these were only plain, affable human people not unlike himself, or the folks back in Paris. He had purchased a glistening new typewriter and installed it with other possessions in a "parlor, bedroom and bath" offered by a bachelor's hotel in Seventy-second street. There he had started work on a series of free-lance feature articles he was advised he could sell to the metropolitan papers — which advice, to his amazement, was subsequently proved correct. He never knew,

however, of the influence exerted by Stella among her high-throned journalistic connections that brought favorable consideration of these offerings. They simply sold and in due time came back checks—more checks. He opened an account in an all-night bank in Seventh Avenue and began to unlearn lifetime conceptions of Broadway, the biggest and smallest Main Street in America.

And in all these pleasant victories, Lill Whalen coached him. She was office manager now for an exporting firm in Leonard Street. She made seventy dollars a week. Wages were high, War orders for embattled Europe caused a shortage of competent help. And yet Lillian held her place on merit.

A hundred times a week David had to pause and demand if this could be the blowzy little baggage whom Ned Farrell had summoned in from the sidewalk eight years before and awarded with a thankless toothpick. Yet when he met the Mannings, he understood. They lived in a gray-toned apartment off upper Riverside Drive—calm-eyed, soft-voiced people, possessing a sweet-faced little girl with a brace about a paralytic leg.

He learned how to move about the city swiftly by elevated train and subway. He discovered taxicabs, roof gardens, head waiters, Greenwich Village. He could order hotel service without tipping too lavishly and find his way into Broadway cabarets. He learned how to negotiate newspaper offices without being frustrated by Hebraic office boys. Crowds no longer baffled him and confused him.

He found himself so busy the first two weeks, absorbing new impressions, adapting himself to this unique wave of sudden prosperity, that he had small time for homesickness, loneliness, introspection. And Lillian was increasingly a revelation.

She loved him. In a thousand ways, refined by her broader sophistication, equipped with keener perceptions of human nature which only city life evolves, she showed it. She showed it in her grim, quiet but no less fierce conflicts to preserve and protect his interests—which she always viewed later in whimsical amusement. She showed it in the thousand and one evidences of solicitation and understanding which opened a new social world to the man for whom the female

of the species had always been a creation to be contacted with a shell about his heart or cinch around his wallet.

This warmed his vanity almost as much as it mellowed his philosophy. Her metropolitan self-confidence was such that he fell easily into looking to her as his mentor — without chagrin. Meanwhile the cast was being acquired for his play. Rehearsals were in progress in an empty dance hall overlooking Lincoln Square.

The only tarnish on all this glitter was the thought of Allie and The Family. Memories of them came with poignant self-arraignment on rainy Sunday afternoons or in the quiet hours of very early morning — when all the city roar was hushed and he lay and listened to the hoot of tugboats over on the river. What would he do for Allie and The Family? Something vast and grand, of course, when his play went finally before the public and drew him royalties in thousands monthly.

Beyond seeing Harmsworth once or twice — with whom he would later share his royalties — and lunching with him and Starring one rainy noontime, they had nothing in common. The more experienced playwright's code and character antagonized the newspaperman from New England. They kept to their separate ways. And David's way was Lillian's. Mostly.

So matters advanced and the rehearsals of the play continued. Several forenoons he spent at first in the Lincoln Square dance hall until he recognized that a mere author is all too frequently a fly in the butter of a producer's composure and a wart on the nose of Dame Drama on principle — unless one were as notorious, arrogant and blasé as Harmsworth.

And then, one afternoon the second week of March, he entered the foyer of his hotel to behold a woman start suddenly from a stiff-backed chair against a Georgian pillar. He came abreast of her. She clutched his arm.

"Allie!" he choked in amazement.

His wife had grown stouter since he had seen her last — almost fifteen months it had been; she wore a brown tailored suit of cheap material and a round box hat with long red feather. He saw, too, with a little pang of pity, that Allie was aging; her face was sallow; she had lines about her neck.

"Well?" she greeted him. And her smoldering eyes swept him.

"How — how — did you ever find me?"

"I should think you'd say that!"

David felt at a loss just how to receive her. Emotions milled within him — twinges of conscience for the freedom he had been enjoying as though he had no right to any freedom whatsoever, alarm over ensuing complications with Lillian, delight at really beholding the girl he had married and would have loved fiercely if she had been less phlegmatic; pity for her tawdry appearance — her air of forlorn defiance with which she sought to cope with this monster Manhattan that was inexorably corrupting her consort.

"Are you — down here — alone?"

"Of course I'm down here alone! Do you imagine you've sent me money enough lately to bring along any — moral support?"

He shifted uneasily, aware that he was flushing. He suppressed an impulse to kiss his wife — one didn't kiss Allie as a general proposition and certainly not in her present mood. Lill's shining devotion was missing. And whereas Lill's shapely mouth turned prettily upward at its corners, Allie's mouth turned downward — grimly, pessimistically. It was — well, just a mouth.

"I'm glad you're here, that's certain. It was going to write and tell you —"

"Yes, you were! If that negro girl in Springfield hadn't given me your address — after an argument — I'd never have found you at all. A fine, faithful husband you are! I wonder you can look me in the face!"

"I'm only down here temporarily, till my play is produced."

"You needn't alibi your conduct. A lot you've written us about your play — or anything else. If Ruthy's husband hadn't found an item about it by accident —"

"Shush! Don't talk so loud." Several people about the 'phone stand were eying them amusedly.

"Well, let's go upstairs where I can talk to you privately."

"I can't take you upstairs."

"Why not? Got someone else there it might prove embarrassing to have me meet?"

"These are bachelor apartments," he declared. "Women aren't allowed upstairs."

"Why not? I'm your lawful wedded wife, ain't I?"

"Come out with me, Allie. We'll go somewhere to a restaurant."

"I don't want to go to a restaurant. I'm not down here to gad."

"Where's your luggage?"

"I didn't bring any luggage — except what I've got in my wristbag." And she indicated the sizable, unstylish thing she carried; possibly it contained toilet articles and a sleazy nightdress.

"Then come out and we'll find a hotel."

"I won't go to a hotel. I'm staying with you."

"Well, come out somewhere for the present and we'll talk."

Allie followed him back to the street because David was moving in that direction and if she didn't follow him she might lose him. A brainier woman would have shown herself calmer, more capricious, felt her way discreetly till she knew her ground. Allie was not especially brainy; the only expedient which produced satisfactory results on males with which she was conversant was resentful spleen amounting to open excoriation. In short, a "spell." Her only source of fortitude was the correctness of her position. She was a wronged and neglected wife. Society was with her. Let David go too far — if the miscreant dared!

So she followed him to the walk and stood with angrily thumping heart while David halted a taxi. She never believed for a moment that lawfully wedded wives aren't allowed in their husband's apartments. It was, of course, a ruse to keep her from his rooms.

"Allie," he began timidly, as the vehicle moved forward into Broadway, "believe it or not, but — I'm terribly glad to see you! I've been thinking of you a lot, wondering just how we could arrange matters —"

"Arrange what matters?" Instantly in the term "arrange" she sensed some subtle scheme of a wanton social order to slide her into the discard. And she saw herself being slid into the discard "after all she had been through."

"About your coming down here to live with me — *without The Family*."

"Oh — you really had given it some thought, had you?"

"Yes, I've given it a lot of thought." He could not sense that he had anything especially in common with this semi-strange woman — except the twins and The Family and their country background. And yet — well, she was his wife. Deep in his heart he would rather have been intrigued by her than any other woman on earth. Any married man could explain it. He even reached out shyly and found her hand. She yanked it away. Yet not before he had been startled by its roughness.

That yanking away was the old, old resentment he had learned to know so well. Never since that awful fiasco of their wedding trip had Allie come toward him — speaking figuratively. Always she conveyed that elusive gesture of repulsion — of yanking away. He sighed raggedly.

"Yes," he affirmed in slightly harder voice, "I've given it a lot of thought. Sometimes I feel as though you and I never had the chance to get really acquainted."

This sounded penitent. Allie felt she was "bringing him 'round." She wondered if she could afford to be magnanimous just yet. "Well, whose fault was that?"

"That's just what I can't make out, Allie. I often wish I could."

"You mean you don't know?"

"Oh — I suppose you're ready to say it was mine —"

"Then you bet you know! If you'd only been a little more domestic — a little more considerate of the feelings of other people — you'd have had a chance to get acquainted with what sort of woman you'd handicapped. That's been the chief trouble with you, David. Selfishness. The only person you can think about is yourself!"

"No," he said finally, a little ring of remorse in his voice, "maybe I'm not domestic."

He had a vision as he confessed it of The Family gathered of an inclement evening in the front room of The Ark. He saw Pa Haskell, collarless and shoeless, neck and ears grimy, reading his newspaper and puffing audibly on an insufferable pipe. He saw Mother Parker with her hair uncombed since morning, sitting on a chair ludicrously small and sighing over the holes in the family socks. He heard Ruthy banging and muttering in the kitchen where she helped Rosy wash the dishes under duress. He pictured Allie diapering one of the twins shamelessly in the midst of these, because

raising the human animal necessitated such infantile obscenities — the other twin crawling about a dusty floor and pulling down objects left carelessly within reach which crashed with an ensuing wail. Willie and his dogs, too, came in for recollection. The atmosphere of the home cluttered and smothery. Inmates falling over one another, representing inexorable expense, destroying privacy, living in hectic turmoil, harmless altercation, lovable discord. No — perhaps he wasn't domestic. Certainly The Family was never more repellent than when he so considered it in the eye of his mind.

They reached an upstairs Times Square restaurant without David speaking again. Allie had almost forgotten her ill temper in wonderment at the myriad lights, the flaming resonance of The Great White Way. But it returned quickly when she saw David hand the driver a dollar bill. And the fellow kept it — all of it! So *that* was the way David flung his hard-earned money to the winds down here while she slaved her fingers to the bone up north sewing seconds for the mill at four cents a garment? She would see about it. She went up the stairs bellicosely and was blindly defiant at the lovely scene of syncopated animation displayed before her.

"Well," asked David, when the Chinese boy had departed with their order, "how's all The Family?" He put aside the menu and tried to show genuine interest.

"Huh! I guess if you cared so much for The Family you'd have come up to see us oftener than a year and three months!" And she began yanking dishes and cutlery about the cloth.

"Oh, for God's sake, will you cut out your grouch and be civil?" David backed his chair a little way from the table in angry despair.

Allie jolted. Such an outbreak of temper was new in her experience of David.

"I've got no grouch," she finally replied. And she tried to be superior. But tears were close behind her eyes. In reality, she was terrified — more terrified than she dared to admit. The whole situation was agonizingly beyond her, momentarily receding further. Why had she come alone? Why hadn't she brought her mother — Pa Haskell — even Ruthy?

"Yes, you've got a grouch! You've done nothing but snap

at everything I've said since the moment I first saw you." And though he said it with spirit, inside he was sorry. Not that he said it, but that he had to say it at all. It was like striking the woman a blow. That he did it with his tongue made no difference. He did it.

"Well, haven't I a good reason to show a grouch? God knows I've had nothing but care and work since I married *you* — while you've been out kicking up your heels and enjoying yourself ——"

"Have I? Who said so? How about the money I've been earning the past eight years? Who got it?"

"I've earned whatever *you* sent me, thank you!" Allie's constitutional rôle in a fracas was ever to be scrupulously polite. And yet her voice held knots. In all that great metropolis she had no one to whom she might turn or cling but the man before her. David suddenly recognized it. In a softer tone he replied, "Oh, let's forget our problem for once, Allie, dear. While you're down here just let's have a good time together — you and I. Mabe up for that wedding trip we missed! How about it?"

Dave looked at his wife in the silence which followed. He was smitten with increasing tenderness. He wanted her to love him and live with him. He wanted it terribly. It was nothing but his starvation for affection that had caused those creases down his cheeks which resembled physical suffering.

"Eat your dinner, Allie," he begged in softer tone.

It was the touch of sympathy for which the wife's heart hungered till her stomach was sick. She made a deliberate effort to masticate the roast. But she was painfully out of place in this throng. The clothes which might have appeared modish up in Paris were frumpy down here. Her hands were disfigured with work — at least, when compared with Lillian's lithe fingers which Dave had come to know so well. Lillian! He thought of her waiting for them to keep an engagement with Clara Hope Benedict. How could he possibly explain to Allie that he had intended dining that evening with a famous actress — or take Allie along and introduce her as his wife? Allie's agony would be as acute as Clara Benedict's amusement. He said, "Excuse me for a minute, honey. I've got to call someone on the telephone."

In the 'phone booth he connected with Lillian. He loathed himself when he gave the laughing, trusting, tender-hearted

girl the inference they must break their engagement on account of the arrival of "a friend from Vermont."

"Who is it?" chaffed Lillian.

"One of the persons who once worked on the *Telegraph*. No one you ever knew very well. It's just as well for reasons I know you want to keep secret — why we'd better stay apart until they leave town."

"All right," laughed Lillian. "See you when I see you!" And across the wire she ended her light-hearted "by-by" with an endearing word.

He returned to Allie feeling like a Turk — the way he juggled these women for his male convenience. He hated such deceit and subterfuge. Yet he was in a predicament that must be handled with all the diplomacy at his command — or so he told himself. He could not tear or smash with either woman — for the sake of the women themselves. Again any man might explain it.

Allie had dried her tears in the interim and consumed half the food on her plate. David returned — determined not to let the situation conquer him. Again the old, old gesture of plowing stubbornly through mud with twice the persistence it took to scale the heights to a clean-cut settlement.

"How'd you like to go to the Hippodrome with me to-night?" the fuddled husband demanded with forced joviality.

"The Hippodrome? What's that?"

"The biggest theater on earth. One of the sights of New York. They put a three-ringed circus on its stage."

"Does it cost much?"

"Oh, bother the money! Allie, dear, let's forget our family differences — and money — and the relatives — and be sweethearts together. Can't we?" There were tears in his voice though his lips were smiling.

"With all we've got to take care of up north, you can't blame me for thinking of expense." The bellicosity had become deflated from Allie. She spoke like a wistful little girl.

"No — I don't blame you. But our prospects are looking up. I'm beginning to make good money writing for the Sunday papers. I guess, after all the care and money we've spent on other folks, we owe it to ourselves to take a few days off. And get acquainted."

"All right," she responded. "Do they have ice cream here, David? Could I have a little?"

CHAPTER X

LET NO MAN PUT ASUNDER

He took her to the Hippodrome that evening. They walked the distance from Times Square to Sixth Avenue. Frequently it became necessary for Allie to step ahead in sidewalk traffic. In such moments the man looked at his wife with renewed remorse.

The brown suit she had made herself; poor tailoring proclaimed it. He learned later the hat had "stood" her \$1.98 for materials — one dollar of that for the feather.

A woman's character and fiber is best proclaimed, however, by the way her hair grows from the back of her neck and — her footwear, especially her heels. Allie's hair curled daintily enough from the nape of a not ungraceful neck. But her heels were sloppy. Fifty cents spent at the cobbler's would have altered the wife's whole appearance. Yet Allie had not so concerned herself.

When they had secured balcony seats in the mammoth playhouse, the man turned to assist the woman with her jacket. Sleeve linings were torn where stitches were coming apart. Her buff-colored waist looked washed without ironing. She did not appear shabby so much as *rumped*. She took off her little box hat, eyes staring wide at the theater's proportions meanwhile, and jabbed the pin in its crown. Immediately her mass of top hair started over one ear. Yet it was not exactly slovenly. It matched the rest of her lack of grooming.

"To-morrow," the husband said grimly, "you and I go over on the Avenue and I buy you some clothes!"

This recalled Allie to herself. "I guess you'll find I won't object," she answered huskily. But she added, "Providing you think you can afford it."

"Don't you think it's about time *you* had some new things without all The Family yowling 'Me too'?"

"I've felt I didn't have the right — with The Family needing so much!" But further discussion of a hackneyed subject was stopped by the opening crash of the orchestra.

It was the first experience of its kind that he had ever enjoyed with Allie. And he did enjoy it. A great urge of blessed relief grew within him as it came to him that they were legitimately married, that they had their babies, their background in common. Suddenly, at a clown's pantomime, Allie began laughing. She chuckled at first, then shrieked. It was the first time the husband could recall it as occurring. In all their married lives — the eighth year now — this was the initial occasion on which he had ever heard the wife of his youthful bosom laugh heartily, unreservedly.

He reached over once in the dark and slid his hand over hers. Tenderly, despite its coarseness, he pressed it. She turned to him sharply. But he was looking intently at the stage. She did an inexplicable thing then for Allie — she turned and thrust nose and lips into his arm at the shoulder. The whimsical charm of the cozy little gesture increased the swollen sensation in the husband's throat. Increasingly, as the evening progressed, it came to him with damning conviction — *because of The Family* he and Allie had never found time to become acquainted with one another. They had two children and yet the exasperating Family kept them all apart.

The reaction was beginning on Allie — reaction from The Family. The little dinner-table quarrel, caused mostly by her terror of the huge metropolis, had exhausted her. She was the homeless child, far away from mother or family, with the husband the only companion. When she had disrobed in a hotel room later that midnight, slipped into the sleazy nightdress, snapped out the lamps and crept in beside the husband, her clutch of him was the most piteous thing which had happened that day.

As for David — he found himself trembling. Ages and ages, it seemed to have been, since he had felt Allie's head in the hollow of his shoulder. To have her back thus was dreaming true. The hotel seemed a desert island on which the two of them had been cast for the single night. No babies whimpered distractingly in a corner. The wife was not worn and exasperated to a point that the husband's caresses were distasteful.

"Allie, dear," he whispered tenderly, "can't we go back and start all over? Can't we be sweethearts again — just you

and I — married sweethearts — always beautifully alone like this? Isn't it better than being surfeited with Family?"

He knew she was sobbing, using the top of the sheet to wipe the tears from her care-lined face.

"Maybe — you're — right," she answered.

"You really see it, Allie?"

"I don't know. I'm tired of being alone, Davie. I'm as tired as you of — responsibility. Love me to-night, Davie. I just — want to be — loved!" She turned her face, raised her lips, kissed him gently on the mouth.

It was the first *voluntary* kiss she had ever given him since Little Hank's funeral.

Silence ensued — broken only by the sharp bark of taxi klaxons far below or the gentle whirring of elevator cables out in the halls. Allie snuggled closer. Once more she kissed him.

"I'm sorry — I had a grouch — at the table to-night."

"That's all right, honey. You weren't to blame. Neither of us has been to blame. It's been The Family."

"Oh, Davie," moaned the wife, "I'm tired. Terribly, terribly tired! Oh, I don't mean physically tired. Somehow I never felt so physically rested in my life."

"And for nearly eight years I've been tired that way, Allie. And you called me — selfish."

"I just said — I was sorry — David!"

The man smoothed the hair from her round, moist forehead. He ran his fingers through it gently. Oh, how many nights had he groped for her thus — when her face had been turned the other way — *toward the wall!*

"I guess, Allie darling, The Family's all right in its place. Everyone has a family, I suppose. But we've dissipated in Family. We've had our noses rubbed in Family till the hurt has kept us from being ourselves."

David now discovered it was Allie who was trembling. And through his physical self ran a subtle, wondrous peace. So the prodigal must have felt the night he came home and fell comfortably asleep on cutlets of fatted calf. He went on after a time — whispering cozily:

"Let's see if you and I can't solve the problem diplomatically. Let's see if we can't contrive to leave your mother up in Paris, keeping house for my father. Let Ruthy and Hinkle live there — if they can't find a home of their own.

You and I will get an apartment down here for just us two—us two and the girls. If you can't do the work alone—if the babies confine you too much—we'll get a maid. Let's keep it like this—like it is between us right this moment—for all the rest of our lives."

"All right," she said penitently, a new rôle for Allie. "Love me, David. Maybe—I'm as hungry for it—as yourself. Only somehow I've never found the time before. Hug me tight! Hold me close! Oh, dear husband of mine, I'm so tired inside!"

Next day he took her shopping. He bought her a tailored suit, smart frocks, the first fifty-dollar hat she had ever pinned on her head. He was a trifle astounded as he beheld her later in one of the frocks, costumed for dinner. She had slipped out of the hotel an hour earlier, had a coiffeur dress her hair. Was this the woman he had married? He suddenly caught her in his arms and crushed her. She protested yet he ignored it. He covered her face with his kisses and she cuffed him playfully. She complained she must go back to the glass and re-powder her nose.

That night he was happy as a boy. He took her to a play. He was pardonably proud of Allie. In her high-heeled pumps, new clothes, altered appearance of her hair, she was the equal of any woman he beheld. Afterwards they spent two hours at a famous cabaret.

The Family was very far removed in the days which followed. Neither referred to it, though Allie began to carry a wistful expression and talk increasingly about the twins. This was natural, permissible. David talked about them also. Husband and wife looked at apartments on Morningside. The rentals shocked Allie but David reassured her. "Don't bring down the old Paris furniture," he told her. "Just pack clothes and small belongings—and come with the girls. My play will be going by the time you arrive. We can afford new furniture throughout."

Eight days she stayed. A far different Allie started for home at last than had arisen from a foyer chair to confront her husband spleenishly.

They had settled on their home—a six-room apartment on the upper Drive, overlooking the Hudson. David signed the lease. The place would be available October first. That was just as well, they decided. Allie and the children would

thus avoid the heat of a New York summer. They likewise chose their furniture but did not buy it. Plenty of time for that in the fall. Allie would come down a week in advance. They would live at a hotel till they had the place furnished. And so Allie's stay narrowed down to her last day, the last twenty-four hours, and she came to go home.

"You love me, don't you, Davie?" she asked wistfully, the last night they spent together. She wanted to hear him say it again and again.

"Of course I do, honey. I've always loved you. It's simply been because I've wanted you so badly — alone to myself — that I've acted as I have."

"And there — isn't — any other woman, is there, David?"

It was the question he had dreaded from the first. Yet now it had come, he faced it manfully. "I've never been untrue to you, Allie. And there won't be any other woman — if we can always live alone on our desert island!"

This seemed to satisfy her. God knew he meant it — every word and syllable.

And the next day she left.

"Come back with me, Davie!" she begged impulsively, as they rode in a cab to the station. She seemed to distrust herself.

"I can't, Allie. I've got to be here for consultation — and my Sunday newspaper work." Yet he knew it was subterfuge. He did not want to mess again with The Family. He wanted to forget The Family, have done with it, forever. Yes, even his father — at least in his home. Maybe he was unfilial, but he wanted privacy. He wanted his home and his wife and his babies to himself. Inviolable!

"All right," she submitted humbly. "I'll stand the summer somehow and be back the last of September."

"I'll count the days!" he laughed.

"Will you? *Really?*" Her eyes sought each of his own as they waited for the train gates to open.

"Yes, Allie dear," he said solemnly, "I will!"

She dropped her new hatbox to put both arms about his neck. She caressed him tightly — convulsively — when the gates slid open and the moment came for parting. Again and again she kissed him. He did not believe Allie could disclose such passion. Then she straightened her hat, picked up the awkward circular box, made sure of her ticket and

the wad of bank notes he had given her, asked for a final kiss, got it, pressed into the forward surging crowd, waved to him, showed her ticket to the gateman and ——

Was gone!

David turned.

Immediately the terminal concourse was empty, the people about him merely — creatures. Allie was *gone*! He must go back to his apartment, sleep in a lonesome bed, eat lonesome meals.

By degrees his thoughts worked back to Lillian. Lillian was still in New York. Of course. And yet ——

How could he go to "the other woman" with his wife scarcely gone from the trainshed? Yet he had to see Lillian. He had to go up and confess — have things settled with Lillian — else hate and loathe himself for a cad the rest of his days. Not to-night, however. That night he went to a movie.

Once or twice along toward morning, lying awake in the dark, he shuddered with sickening apprehension. Supposing his play should be a failure? Or worse, supposing Lillian didn't take things "right." Supposing she refused to let him return to his wife after all she had done for him? Supposing she did something that wrecked his relations with Starring, causing his play to be thrown on the scrap heap?

He struggled all next day with his perturbation — hourly keeping track of Allie's progress northward in his mind, imagining her arrival in Paris, going up to The Ark, greeting The Family, telling them all about it.

At seven o'clock he called Lillian on the 'phone.

"I'm coming up," he said tersely.

"You'd better!" she laughed. "If you'd stayed away another twenty-four hours, I'd have sworn a woman had been down here from Paris — not your newspaper friend from the *Telegraph*!"

She was dressed in loose negligee when he finally reached her apartment. Her hair was down, girlishly, and caught at the back with a ribbon — not unlike Carrie's when first he had known her. Never had Lillian looked so delectable or tender, laughing, trustful. The man was trembling as he went past her into the rooms he had come to know so well. One of the most terrific moments — requiring courage — in

the life of a man had come; facing an unsuspecting woman with the pronouncement she is no longer wanted in the life of the man whom she loves.

"What's the matter, honey? You look ill." Her concern only stabbed him the more.

"Maybe," he confessed.

"Been dissipating this week with your old apple-knocker from the sticks?"

"Lily, I haven't been this week with any — apple-knocker from the sticks."

"You *haven't*?" She had closed the door and moved forward with the little twisting glide she frequently affected.

"Davie, what ails you, honey? Who's been down here with you? What's happened?"

"My wife," he said simply, surprised he could do it.

"Your WIFE!"

"We've made up, Lillian." He averted his eyes from that whimsical laughter freezing on her loving solicitous features.

He turned and walked toward the window. With a stab like a hot knife he noted she had fixed a little gateleg table with cutglass, silver cutlery, dainty flowers, food — to celebrate the two-penny occasion of his coming back.

The silence continued. He couldn't endure it. He turned around. The room was empty.

"Lillian?" he cried in agony.

She made no answer. The door to her bedroom stood open. Its lamps were lighted. He stepped quickly across and looked inside.

She was seated on the edge of her snowy-white bed, hands listless in her lap, shoulders bowed over, head dropped. Never had he seen a woman's posture so broken.

At once, manlike, he started to explain, defend himself. She raised her hand.

"It isn't that your wife was down here," she said poignantly. "It isn't that you're married and haven't a perfect right to make up with your wife if you choose."

"Oh, Lily, I ——"

"— it's that you couldn't come frankly and tell me — let me know exactly why you deliberately neglected me for one whole week!"

"What difference would it have made? Besides — I wanted to think — to make sure ——"

"That you were going to have one of us! Is that it?"

He did not answer.

"Oh — David!"

"Lillian — in God's name, what ails me? Am I nothing but a cur — a moral coward — a dirty, spineless cad?"

The woman looked up. "No, David," she answered finally, "I don't know as I'd exactly call you that. But — you don't know women."

He had a hot, dry, frustrated feeling. He wanted to wrestle something, smash something, get relief in physical effort to justify himself. He heard her speaking:

"So you're going back to your wife? I suppose I should have suspected. No, you wouldn't stay away from me a week for any other woman. Tell me about — her visit."

He tried to comply. Fitfully at first. He gained courage, conviction, self-justification, as he went along. Lillian only sat quietly, pulling at her shapely fingers. But her sea-green eyes were upon him tragically. And when he had finished, she started up, slowly shaking her head.

"Come out," she said. "We'll have dinner."

They went out after a time and tried to eat the dinner. Something between them was blighted. The woman's demeanor of hurt reticence, forced indifference, poignant pre-occupation, blistered the man worse than a tirade or blows.

"So," she repeated finally, when the hideous meal was ended, "you're going back to your wife? You've made — up?"

"She's my wife, Lillian. I married her — gave her two children. She loves me, I discovered. All our troubles have only been caused by The Family —"

"No need to apologize any more, David. I might have been a bad little girl once upon a time. I knew no better. I'm older now. I've got no excuse."

"No excuse for what?"

"Breaking up a man's home — if he doesn't really want it smashed in his heart." She bit her lip as if holding back emotions. "Coming between a husband and wife — simply because of my own selfish love or because I may be able to do more for him than his wife."

"Lillian — won't you believe it's possible for a man to love two women equally strong but in different ways, because they represent different things in his life?"

"Perhaps. But would you want us women to love two men equally strong just because they might stand for different things in *our* lives? As I told you before, dear lad, you don't know women."

"I will — if I keep on at this rate!"

"A woman wants all or nothing!"

David's dismay was turning to despair. He finally arose to go. For the first time since his arrival in New York, there was no caress at the door. He wanted to kiss her but could not bring himself to do it. He was no philanderer with women.

"Good night, Lillian," he said thickly, eyes on his hat.

"Good — night — David!"

"I'll see you to-morrow as usual?"

"Perhaps!"

So he left her — left her there at the door of the apartment he had come to know so well — that was more of a home than his bachelor apartment. He left her with the sea-green eyes upon him in mute torture, the lips bloodless, the brows constricted. He left the woman who had pulled herself up from the gutter — the girl of Farrell's restaurant, the Beech Street billboard, Judge Wright's office, those nights in Wickford — left the Wonder Girl who had descended to him, rehabilitated, recreated, from the clouds. *Oh, the women we leave!*

He cried himself to sleep that night in his chambers. Lillian estranged by his "confession," five months intervening before Allie's return!

She was out when he went up next day. And the morning thereafter brought her letter.

She had thought matters over (she wrote). She had faced many cruel situations in life but none so cruel as this. She was convinced that her continued presence in New York could only be a source of distress and heart-break to them both. What was the use? She was certain he loved his wife the stronger and better, else he never could endure the tyranny of her distemper, avarice and relatives. Better, then, for her — Lillian — to draw quietly away and live her life as she had been trying to live it before that day of the flying meet in Springfield, rather than remain and be a constant thorn in the side of David's financial success and domestic "peace." She wished him to accept that she bore him no ill

will — nothing but a love he might never understand. He was always to think of her as a woman his chivalry and kindness had rescued from the gutter, and yet she wished to carry the hope away with her that in some poor measure she had repaid that debt. She would never forget him — how could she? And so good-by. She would take it kindly if he would never mention her in Paris. All that part of her life was dead. She wanted it to stay so. She was going West that night — she would be on her way by the time he held this letter in his hand. She was not going to “try to forget” and all that silly nonsense. She could *never* forget. And yet the experience would not wreck her life because she did not intend to let it. She had lived above much. She would live above this. She hoped, now that she had started him, that he would write many plays and have a wonderful career. And she asked him to always recall her with a feeling of exaltation that they had been able, in malleable periods in their lives, to help one another. And so —

Lill Whalen!

The man refused to believe it until he had gone to her apartment and confronted Stella.

“You spineless little shrimp!” the room-mate cried. “I’d like to wring the neck of you or your contemptible wife — I don’t know which! You’ve completely broken the heart of one of the biggest and most wonderful women God ever put together!”

“Go on!” prompted David numbly. “Rub it in! I deserve it!”

“I tried to dissuade her. I tried to make her see her mistake in going away — to think of herself. I couldn’t. She’d reasoned it out you subconsciously loved your ball and chain or you’d never put up with it.”

“How could Lillian go away if she really —— ”

“My dear Goops — some folks think there can be no love without blighting jealousy. Lill wasn’t one of them. Jealousy is a sordid manifestation of a bad inferiority complex — the insane fear of incapacity to love enough to hold the beloved.”

“You think Lill didn’t have —— ”

“Lill’s inferiority complex didn’t tend in that direction. Get out! I want to go to bed!”

CHAPTER XI

"ME TOO!"

Ensued a heated summer with ominous events transpiring abroad. A try-out was given David's play in Stamford. Then had come autumn, a first night when a weak and bilious boy had watched people crowding in to see *his* production, some terrible after-moments when he had heard the cry of "Author! Author!" And he had gone out on the stage with the slightly bored Harmsworth and mumbled an unintelligent something at which he kicked himself later a score of nights in his bed. His subsequent recollection had it that he had shown himself an ass.

But the following fortnight told the real story. Starring had declared the production must do ten thousand dollars' worth of business per week to justify its continuance. That initial fortnight it had done thirty-four — seventeen thousand dollars per week — and gave prospect of an increasing run up to Christmas. One critic wrote:

The success of this production, its almost instantaneous approval by press and public, is difficult to comprehend. It is frankly the crucifixion of the average American family — one member of which is the motivation for the thought and activity of all the rest.

It is difficult to understand because it goes in direct contradiction to the prevailing spirit of the times. The younger generation is far from being the galvanic power which energizes and sustains the older to-day. The exact reverse is true. Boys and girls lean on the old folks, bleed them of money for their escapades, impose on them, kick loose from them only when they are no longer necessary, yet invariably fly back toward the home nest when the world repays them in kind or abrades them too harshly.

Perhaps its appeal lies deeper in that every spectator reads into the delicious comedy his own experiences — having constantly to bolster up someone related to him by blood, and play the providence for the spineless and indolent who may only be made to shift for themselves when that providence is snatched

away by death or war—as in the case of Abel Loring, the young hero-architect.

At best, it is a cross-section of modern life, cut cleanly and truthfully, and preaches the lesson along with most delectable entertainment that so long as the pushers permit it, the leaners will lean. God made humanity that way. Then again—a certain amount of drag is necessary for the most energetic and brilliant of us, else we might skid off to our own disaster.

Far more potent, however, was a second criticism which David read with eyes that saw nothing and ears that heard only silence for a long time afterward:

One cannot witness this little masterpiece of satire without pausing a score of times to take stock of one's own family, and ask wherein it differs from the hectic Loring family which the authors have delineated so skillfully.

Most of us are prone to see our own relatives and dependents typified in the Lorings. And yet it is only human nature to consider that *our* case is the exception, *our* relatives and dependents cannot—or should not—be judged as the public judges the Lorings.

All of us are moral cowards, too, in some way at heart. We hate to speak the truth, to have our rights, to stand out for self-justice, when it means causing domestic distress, speaking words that wound our loved ones and leave a grievous hurt. And yet too often, they are such a nuisance!—if we have too many.

No, day after day, month after month, and year after year, we stand for them, suffer in silence—or go away at last as young Abel Loring went away, surfeited with relatives, the victim of our own emotions, our cowardice, our ultra-tender hearts. And the world judges cruelly.

The idea is said to have originated with a Springfield newspaperman and yet its situations are so natural, its climax so inexorable, one has the feeling that it was written autobiographically and from the heart. One thing is certain: One comes away with a consciousness of such clever presentation that if a man who had lived all his life on a desert island yet knew the language in which the players speak, beheld this offering, he would leave the theater with an almost complete knowledge of what average American family life resembled in the pre-War period of 1907-1914.

There were hundreds of such criticisms; hundreds, too, from official observers who frankly did not like the production and said so in no uncertain terms. But favorable or

unfavorable, David's play "took hold." A company was made up to open in Boston — another in Chicago. Night after night the Alhambra continued crowded. And David's first royalty check made him dizzy. After all his misfortunes, the Law of Averages had not failed to operate.

He had that buoyant, cut-loose-from-earth feeling over again — an armor about him which nothing could pierce. The day that he wired an even thousand dollars to Allie was one of the happiest and proudest of his life. Vanity went into the lavish gesture mostly, though he did not clearly see it. It was self-vindication for all her caustic comment on his inability to get ahead. And he lived for twenty-four hours in a pleasant glow of soothing imagination, mentally depicting what would happen in The Ark when the money came in — It did!

He went up to the Riverside apartment toward the last of September, where much of the new furniture had been delivered as a surprise for his wife — such as they had chosen together — and busied himself, man-fashion, with finishing touches.

There was no denying it a homey, attractive apartment. Its soft gray walls, white enameled woodwork, blue-toned floor rugs and mahogany or Circassian walnut furnishings were relieved by the dainty salmon-hued silks of lamp shades and drapes. He walked through the rooms that last Friday afternoon, surveying their fastidiousness with satisfaction. At last he was going to have a real home and *live!*

He sublet his bachelor apartment that week. As he lay reading in bed the first evening in the new quarters alone — the smoke of his last cigar for the night seemed profanation of the dainty premises. He felt like a bridegroom waiting the coming of his bride. At last he had arrived on a hilltop and could afford to look back on the valley with whimsical contempt. That is, barring Lillian! He extinguished the cigar, and fell dreaming of Lillian, wondering where she had gone, what she was doing, if he would ever see her again. From dreaming with eyes open he started dreaming with them closed. When he opened them — in bewilderment — he found it was morning; that he had neglected to extinguish the bed lamp which had burned throughout the night.

He splashed in the immaculate white-tiled bath; later he

went out to his breakfast on Broadway. He could not upset the shining order of appointments in the kitchenette. Allie would be there by lunch time; he could have real home cooking again. And whatever Allie's other deficiencies, as a cook she left nothing to criticize.

He tried to work during the forenoon at the glistening new typewriter in the "den" overlooking the broad expanse of river. He discovered he could not concentrate. He arrived at Grand Central Terminal an hour ahead of time. He endured the wait. The final half-hour dragged on leaden moments and in the announcer's room the track which would receive Allie's train was duly chalked up. He almost ran to the proper door to be first in line.

Whereupon the train pulled in. The first drummers and visitors from the smoking car straggled through. The crowd of arrivals thickened. Women intermingled in the wake of baggage-weighted Red Caps.

He did not see Allie first, however. *He saw his father!*

Old Zach Haskell being a tall man, his crumpled soft felt hat showed head and shoulders above the human stream milling up the ramp and into the concourse. David stared blankly for an instant, scarcely knowing whether to be glad, angry or perplexed.

Old Zach shuffled through the gate and stood hesitant in the center of the cleared space before the rope line. In his right hand hung a crazy compilation of luggage on a patent handle. One of the straps was dragging on the polished marble floor. David moved forward, half astounded, half exasperated.

"Hello, dad," he greeted. "What brings *you* to New York?"

Zach was not displeased to see his boy after their lengthy separation. He tilted back his elongated little head to behold the son through glasses never more foggy or rakish. "Didn't think I was gonna stay behind to a country town, did you, with the rest all enjoyin' theirselves down here?"

"The *rest* of them? Where — ?"

No need to ask. David saw them. With a flood of blind rage he saw them.

Allie in the lead wore the new tailored suit Dave had bought her in March. She carried one of the twins — David didn't know which one; he was not yet sufficiently acquainted

with his own offspring to distinguish them apart. Mother Parker in an entirely new outfit — and a hideous hat with a pompon — followed, carrying the other child, which still slumbered.

But to his dumfounded dismay, the waiting husband beheld more than these. He saw Ruthy. He saw Willie. He even saw Rosy Trotter. And when he could find the mental concentration to visualize one vision further, he also saw Bugs Hinkle, though he did not recognize Ruth's husband at once.

In through the gate they all tramped and gathered instinctively in a little knot to be received — like a band of refugees, adrift in a foreign land, torn from all they held most dear and consigned to the cruelty of ruthless society which would only receive them as unwanted surplus.

"What's — the large — idea?" the husband gulped. His eyes held on the strange, puny infant — struggling, squirming, whimpering — on Ruthy's shoulder.

Bugs Hinkle saluted him with the freemasonry of fellow New Yorkers. "Hello, Dave, old scout!" He dropped two enormous valises to belabor his brother-in-law jovially on the back. (Dave wanted to clout him on the jaw for the intimacy.) "We just come down to keep Allie company. And I got a swell little scheme to talk over. We'll both clean up!"

Dave backed away and surveyed them.

Others in the vicinity besides David were surveying them. Others in the vicinity were especially surveying Bugs Hinkle and Rosy Trotter. For Solomon in all his glory was never clad as either.

Bugs wore a vaudevillian's sack suit of checks which would have been "loud" when the stars of Primrose and Dockstader were in the ascendant. The coat made his shoulders so square they were almost deformed — as though the upper half of Hinkle's torso had been cleft with three strokes of a saber — two vertical and one across the top, horizontally. On his head and topping his pug-nosed face was a flat felt hat with a crimson band; its brim was turned rakishly up in the front and absurdly down in the back. Bugs' necktie was a Windsor four-in-hand, matching the hatband; it held a great brass horseshoe in the center and took equal metallic prominence with a sizable fob dangling

from Bugs' left lapel. He had been careful to see that his socks were in keeping with hatband and cravat. His oxfords were tans—both of them—and when he walked, they squeaked. Tucked into the straps of one suit case was a heavy Malacca cane.

Rosy Trotter might have come to New York under protest but it was nothing to the mental protest the spectator suffered on beholding Rosy's glass of fashion and mold of form. Never in his life had David beheld Rosy "dressed up." He had known, of course, that she was eccentric—but never so eccentric as this. For Rosy had scrambled the rainbow spectrum for colors and run riot in a pigment factory for hues. The youthful Joseph was once dropped down a well for adorning his person with too violent an assortment of tints and chromatics—and if the incident established a precedent, it was plain that Rosy should be taken to Far Rockaway at once and submerged in the Atlantic without further ado.

The woman wore a cerise blouse with turquoise blue skirt. Her fat neck precluding any semblance of a collar, about it instead she had pinned a flaming yellow scarf with red-tasseled ends. The little "fried-egg" hat on her tightly bound hair was a garden of old-fashioned flowers; she wore thick green stockings and ox-blood shoes. Under one arm she carried a heavy telescope valise with a suit case bumping against one leg. The other conveyed a covered basket. From the basket immediately came a tremendous squawking, hysterical cackling, violent thumps against the lid. Rosy had brought her two prize Rhode Island Reds—Lucy and Napoleon—for kill them or sell them she would not. She looked like a gypsy, only Rosy was pink and corn-fed and a bumpkin instead of swarthy and given to bangles.

Willie, too, made a bid for attention.

Willie in the past year had "sprung up." He was taller than David and almost as tall as Pa Haskell. Long pants, of course, he had negotiated early. Yet he had taken on height till Dave wondered if beneath the trousers the boy's legs concealed stilts. Three big cigars protruded from his upper breast pocket; the corners of his wide, loose mouth were stained with little drips of tobacco juice; he had lost his freckles but grown bigger ears.

Ruthy was the only well-dressed one of the lot. She had

stoutened somewhat since the birth of her baby and though her lines were less willowy, her expensive blue serge suit disclosed her curves all carried in their proper places.

"Oh," gulped David again, when the awkward pause had ended, scarcely knowing whether to swear at Bugs, make a scene with his wife or laugh at Rosy. "So you all came down to keep Allie company?"

"Yeah!" chortled Bugs. "Ain't you glad to see us?"

Suddenly it came to David why the thousand dollars he had sent Allie had barely been adequate to cover the bills in Vermont as she had subsequently written back. He knew why all this *mob* had arrived in Gomorrah decked in purple and fine linen. Somehow they had prevailed on Allie to distribute them their portions. And a yet greater wrath reared its hydra head in David.

"No — I'm not glad to see you! I'm not glad to see anyone but my wife and children. Why have you come here?"

"Haw! Told you so!" cried Rosy shrilly. Then she dropped her bags to clap a fat paw over the basket lid where Lucy and Napoleon were having a little altercation of their own in the dark.

The smiles congealed on the features of Bugs Hinkle and Mother Parker. Apparently Pa Haskell had not heard or did not intend to hear; he was busy inspecting the stupendous ceiling of the concourse through twisted glasses. It developed that his presence there was considered by the man as some sort of punishment on the family for leaving a perfectly good domicile up in Vermont, and coming down to a debatable existence in wicked Manhattan which he'd heard was damp. As for Allie, the worst being known by her husband's utterance, her features hardened. "I want to talk with you a minute, David. Alone!"

"I thought you agreed to leave The Family up in Paris?" that husband snapped, just out of earshot of the rest. Allie was not the woman he had kissed good-by in March at the train gate.

"David — I couldn't. Are you going to be decent or are you not?"

"Why couldn't you? What stopped you?"

"They wouldn't stay in Paris — with Ma and I gone."

"Well, then, why bring your mother?"

"*Where I go, mother goes!* I told you that before a thousand times. I thought it was understood between us."

"Are you married to your mother or married to me?"

"I'm married to you. But that doesn't mean I discard my mother to coddle your selfishness."

"Oh — doesn't it? We'll see about that! For once in my life, I'll tell your mother what I think of her."

"You go doing that and I'll tell your father what I think of *him!*"

"I don't care what you tell anybody. I don't want father down here, either. What's he going to do in New York?"

"Ask him. He paid his own fare."

"Why are Bugs and Ruthy down here, too? And Willie? And Rosy Trotter in that awful dressmaker's delirium —?"

"Ruthy came because Bugs wanted her to come — and because, with Mother gone, there'd be no one up home to mind little Bertrand. Willie came because Mother was afraid to leave him behind in Paris with no home influences. And I brought Rosy because there's no sense in hiring a perfectly strange maid when Rosy's so capable and the children both love her." Allie's face disclosed how desperately she was trying to make her apology convincing. "And besides, Davie, don't you suppose they wanted to see your play?"

"But where do all these people think they're going to live? In our apartment?"

"Oh — we'll manage somehow." Allie said it as though she were anxious to get this little distress over with, and tackle the job of managing somehow.

"We will *not* manage somehow! I had this sort of thing once before — up in Wickford."

"Yes — but we were poor then. We're rich now, aren't we? Maybe we can get them some rooms right in the same apartment house —"

"We'll do nothing of the sort. I don't want them in the same apartment house. I don't want them at all. I don't want anybody but you and the children."

"Well," returned Allie insolently, "they're here and they're your own flesh and blood. What'll you do with them?"

"Have they got any money?"

"Your father's got enough — twelve hundred dollars he received for *The Ark*."

"The Ark! Has he sold it? Well—how about that vaudeville fright and your sister?"

"They've had an awful hard time, Davie—with Ruth's hospital bills and everything."

"Apple sauce! I asked you if they had any money?"

"No. Only what I gave them."

"Oh! So you gave them some money. My money!"

"You sent it to me, didn't you? Wasn't it mine to spend as I chose? After all I've been through and the way I've scrimped, if I couldn't provide my own flesh and blood sister with *one* good outing in her unhappy life——"

"In other words, you're standing up for the crowd imposing on your husband like this?"

"But how are they imposing? We're rich, aren't we? I guess with a couple of hundred thousand dollars——"

"How does being rich make any difference in their imposition? Besides, I haven't got a hundred thousand dollars or *two* or whatever you said—and would like to know where you ever got that absurd figure into your head. Yet even if we're not exactly poor, what money I've got is mine. And I'm not called upon to share it with a lot of domestic spongers!"

"You contemptible *Thing!* When you were poor and they helped you—loaned you money to get ahead—you were glad enough to treat them decently and accept it. Now that the tables are turned, you're just cad enough to boot them all out and let them shift for themselves." Allie was crying now and woke up little Mildred—or it might have been Mabel.

"My God!" groaned the dismayed, discouraged, disillusioned boy. "They helped me with fifty cents and then cost me two dollars and a half! Are they down here permanently?"

"If you want to send them back, do it yourself. Don't leave it to a poor, weak woman!"

Allie's back was rounded with the weight of little Mildred—or it might have been Mabel; she was hot and tired and sooty and perspiring. Whatever David may have thought about her poverty or her weakness, at least she looked her rôle. And a great deadening weariness strangled his anger. Was he going to be damned with these ten people morning, noon and night—spring, summer, autumn, winter—so long

as he lived and made money? Even any filial obligations to his father were obliterated by that avalanche of relatives — that domestic juggernaut which he had the blind, hopeless feeling of never being able to escape, though he moved to the planet Mars.

"My God!" he groaned again. And cast around like an imbecile. Hinkle came over.

"Aw, Dave, ol' top — don't be sore! We don't wanna cause you no trouble and we won't. But I had a great little ol' scheme for cleanin' up — gettin' your play into movies with me as the lead —"

"Damn you and your schemes! Take your wife and brat and clear out to a hotel!"

"David Haskell!" Allie's voice cracked shrilly.

"Never mind any 'David Haskells'! I'm at the end of my tether. I didn't send for any of you but Allie and my girls. I don't want you here. I won't have you here —"

How much more he might have said, what vials of vitriol he might have splashed upon them, was never spoken or splashed.

Because at that instant, to David's wild chagrin, something happened to the group of Mother Parker, Ruthy, Willie, Rosy, a distance away. He knew because he chanced to have his inflamed gaze directly on them at the moment.

The squawking of two fowls had engaged the attention of a Terminal policeman. He was approaching the group when Lucy — or it may have been Napoleon — made a mighty lunge against the top of the basket. *WHAM!* The lid flew up!

And the next instant two hysterical Rhode Island Reds were loose in the concourse of Grand Central Terminal.

Rosy uttered a shriek, made a wild grab for both. But they eluded her. Waving the empty basket insanely, Miss Trotter started also. But she had no wings. They wouldn't have lifted her if she'd had them. Miss Trotter went afoot.

In two directions those fowls scattered, necks ruffled, wits crazed, beaks open, squawking — an animated clothes bag of violent colors after them. She couldn't even run — Rosy couldn't, only trundle. But she trundled swiftly. She trundled terribly.

She collided with porters and upset old ladies. Fastidious

elderly gentlemen in white whiskers had the canes knocked from under them and were spun around bewilderedly. An invalid being pushed trainward in a rubber-tired wheel chair got Napoleon in his lap, his chest, his face — and was immediately clouted by the frantic Rosy's basket.

It appeared that Rosy expected to capture her livestock by bashing it flat. But Lucy and Napoleon had no intention of being bashed flat. Napoleon at last took off from the invalid's head and did a volplane to the roof of the nearby Information kiosk. He lost feathers in this process and called on all the fowl gods that he didn't like New York and wanted to return at once to Vermont; the sooner they took him there, the better he would like it. Gaining the roof's edge he balanced on it rakishly, thrusting his elongated neck from side to side and deporting himself vocally as though he wanted to lay an egg — if he hadn't been a rooster.

Lucy went through a cordon of four policemen, gained the ledge of a ticket window, flapped off with a tremendous beating of wings and skidded the heads of half a hundred people as she gained an open space of floor through the legs of a hurrying lady in knickers, who nearly went down on her chin.

Pandemonium was loose in Grand Central concourse. Police whistles pierced the hubbub. Red Caps scurried. A highly entertained crowd milled excitedly and tried to help capture that poultry by kicking at whichever bird came within kicking distance. Which failed to contribute to either fowl's poise. Twice around the sides of the concourse went Lucy on legs that looked three feet long, helped at times by her wings, cackling shrilly, striving to find a hencoop, sympathy or the outer atmosphere. And after her trundled Rosy Trotter, still waving the basket, hitting everything but her quarry.

Despite his anger, David had to laugh. Allie set little Mildred — or Mabel — on the near-by baggage counter and was torn between maternal guardianship and the wish to help Rosy whom she felt intuitively would end the chase by being arrested. Bugs Hinkle had whipped out his cane and sprung manfully to the chase, making a wild swipe at either fowl as it flapped in his direction. With one of these swipes he whacked a corpulent Red Cap squarely across the stomach. The negro dropped a Pomeranian to seize Bugs

with one hand and his stomach with the other. Whereat the Pomeranian was lost. It was a day of losses. The pursuit became a riot.

Lucy was finally cornered in a rack in the parcel room. Which undoubtedly was the nearest semblance to a hencoop Grand Central Terminal afforded. Napoleon got out through a train gate and was never heard from subsequently. An incoming express may have decapitated him; one of the Red Caps of color may basely have betrayed his confidence and seduced him into a Harlem stew. But Napoleon's visit in Gotham was brief and to the point. It was a sharp point and finished him. Lucy was stuffed back into the basket and only her honest grief — and Rosy's — kept both from arrest for creating a public disturbance or maintaining a nuisance within the Manhattan city limits.

By the time it was over, David's animosity had oozed. He had to do something with these people. After all, they composed his Family, his own flesh and blood, and were down here in a strange and unfriendly city. He couldn't work up his wrath anew — not after the laughter in which he had indulged at Rosy's expense.

"Come on," he ordered gruffly. "We'll talk this over in the apartment." And picking up either Mildred or Mabel, he led the way across the concourse, was joined by the badly ruffled Bugs, and the little herd clodded out to the cab-stand.

It required two taxis to accommodate the party, though Willie would have walked had his frantic mother not put her foot down vehemently. There was no telling what might happen to a green country boy left to wander promiscuously about Manhattan; one of those awful gunman's bullets might fell him the very first corner he turned. No such good luck, thought David.

In the cab with David, Allie and Pa Haskell — Mother Parker began sobbing openly. "I'm sorry I'm intruding, Davie," she whimpered. "I'll go right back home tomorrow — as soon as I've seen your nice play." And she meant it, regardless of the fact that Allie exclaimed vigorously, "The very idea, Ma Parker, you'll do nothing of the sort."

"Oh, forget it for the present," her son-in-law answered. It had seriously occurred to him — what was The Family to think of his play when it beheld itself mirrored in metropoli-

tan dramatics? He wondered if it might not solve his problem. Why worry till he knew? And yet he was sullen — sullen and defiant. For three days he continued sullen and defiant.

So after countless twistings and turnings and stoppings for traffic, the cabs got finally into the Drive. They started northward along the river. And at once the party was enthralled by the vista.

"My stars!" gasped Mother Parker, when they finally halted before the proper doorway. "Do you intend to live in such a swell place as this? Ain't it frightfully expensive?"

David muttered under his breath that it wasn't the apartment that was frightfully expensive and helped out his wife with little Mildred — or Mabel. The second cab had followed them closely. It pulled into the curb as David was assisting his father to the asphalt. From the second cab Willie alighted first, followed by Ruthy. "Hey, Sis!" David heard the youth declaim. "*That's* the kind of ottermobile you oughta buy! A limousine! A real one! And I'll drive it for you!" Willie stood open-mouthed at a twelve-thousand-dollar machine purring on past them up the Drive.

There were bags, bags and more bags. The elevator made three trips to hoist them upward. Rosy required a separate trip for herself and the luckless Lucy. Just where she expected to keep the luckless Lucy or what use the luckless Lucy might be, now that she had lost her consort, didn't seem to occur to any of The Family but David. If it occurred to David at all, it came in the mental prospect of chicken stew for Sunday dinner. The *next* Sunday dinner, if he had to feed this throng — Lucy being present in the rôle of stewart. But they gained the apartment.

"Oo-o-oo!" exclaimed Ruthy in awed amazement. "*This* is something like it!" She spoke as though finishing a sentence begun as The Family piled up into the tenement above the Wickford harness shop several years before.

"Why, David — you've bought the things! You darling! You've furnished it!" cried Allie in equal astonishment. She deposited Mildred — or Mabel — on the waxed floor of the inner hallway. There seemed so many people they clogged the place, though maybe it was only the luggage. Pa Haskell had to come in sideways through the door.

Mother Parker went into the front room directly to "get

the view" and later sat down in a chair. "To think," she affirmed, "that after all these years a daughter of mine should dwell amid such splendor!" And she bounced her huge hips on the chair-springs to test them. She did. One of them broke instantly, or at least something snapped and poked through the tapestry on the bottom, though it might have been only a cleat.

By virtue of having helped select the place and been previously in it, Allie's rôle was not to show herself as at all affected by its appointments. They were all hungry, it developed, and Davie must go out at once to a store and bring in something and she would get them a meal in a twinkling—show them the facilities for Manhattan housekeeping in one swift, overwhelming demonstration. This while taking off her hat, punching up her slobby hair and leaping at once for little Mildred—or Mabel—who on being released in the place had suddenly discovered the goldfish and was trying to catch the creatures with her hands.

"Darned lot of expensive hocus-pocus!" was Pa Haskell's comment on place and furnishings. "And only two bedrooms! How's all this Family to sleep in two bedrooms?"

Bugs Hinkle hung his foolish little hat on the corner of a gilt-framed etching and sat himself down at the baby grand piano. At once it devolved upon Bugs to disclose his long-repressed musical talents "on somethin' worth hammerin'." The dainty apartment echoed to the spirited tempo of a prevailing rag. Little Bertrand, it developed, "had to be 'tended to," however, and Ruthy's acrid voice from one of the bedrooms ordered him to lay off that senseless racket and come in and assist her with his child. Which he did with an oath, his place at the keyboard being at once pounced upon by Willie, who could do "Turkey in the Straw" with bass variations.

The Family in general for the next half-hour milled and flowed and romped through the rooms, poking and prying and taking off covers, changing bric-a-brac and rehanging pictures to suit its individual tastes and fancies.

Rosy couldn't see how she was ever going to operate in any such cramped little space as the white kitchenette and said so, being further incensed by the fact that there seemed no place for the lately widowed Lucy but the bathroom or fire escape.

When at last David was forced to journey forth and rustle provisions for this little army of domestic occupation, the last sound he heard going down the hallway was the final crash of the globe of goldfish. The three children had been turned loose in the front room like little mavericks in a corral. Mother Parker had been "called to look" at something. One of them had raised itself on the taboret which held the exhibit. Of course it was little Betrand. But David didn't care. Let them go ahead and smash the place. They probably would, anyhow.

"Well, what'll it be?" asked the delicatessen woman a few moments later. Her customer glared at the stock.

"Beans!" he answered, none too graciously. "Give me half a dozen cans — the cheapest brand you've got."

"*And* what else?" when the cans had duly been rolled in a paper.

"Ginger snaps," growled David. "Ten pounds!"

CHAPTER XII

COMMENT

The fall and winter of 1916-1917 was a time of strain and concern for the American people. The War in Europe had become a gory stalemate. The *Lusitania* had long since been torpedoed. Wilson was frantically writing reams of international correspondence or addressing Congress on issues that could no longer be ignored by a country in honor.

And yet the theaters filled to capacity each evening and motion-picture films flickered. An uneasy populace intuitively sought an antidote for its anxiety in any reasonably interesting dramatic diversion. So David's comedy continued to edify both the dramatic critic and the blasé New Yorker, the out-of-town buyers for the cloak and suit trades, the stranger within the gates, the cliff-dweller from Harlem.

But the fall and winter of 1916-1917 was also of interest in another and much humbler quarter; it was the season of Carrie Flynt's graduation and the bestowal of her white cap as a full-fledged nurse. And Big Jim Thorne, on his homeward way from a business sojourn in New York, called at the hospital to see her.

Her face attracted Big Jim most and caused the fat man to ponder. She seemed to have acquired a poise that had not maintained in Paris. And her features—well, he recalled nuns with such an expression. She was quite content with her nursing, she said. Never could she repay Big Jim for all he and his late wife had done for her.

"By the way," declared the millionaire, stamping up and down her room in the Nurses' Home, cigar smoke furling behind him, "saw a former friend o' your'n down to New York. David Haskell. Remember him?"

Big Jim failed to catch the pallor that spread over the girl's tiny features, the wince of pain that tightened her brows. "Did you?" she asked. "How is David doing?"

"Not so good. You knew he writ a play? Peach! Went

to see it myself. Laughed ten pounds off me. All about his confounded Family."

"I read what the Springfield papers said about it."

"Yep — they was all in there, The Family. Pa Haskell and Ma Parker. That snobby sister of his wife's who married poorly — and Willie who was always gettin' into fixes. Even saw myself, Carrie — only they couldn't get a fat man big enough in New York, so they stuffed one with pillows. And a girl in it, too, I shouldn't wonder was meant for you. Yep — she bagged him in the end."

"Bagged who?"

"Hero! Who'd you s'pose?"

Carrie paled in earnest then, and sank limply down on the window seat. "You talked with David you said?"

"Went up to his home around six o'clock. They was just eatin' supper — *dinner*, his wife called it down there, though supper was good enough when she was watching mistakes up on the *Telegraph*. Gawd, what 'dog' they tried to put on!"

"His wife is with him, then?"

"Wife and Family had come down the previous week. The place was stuffy. Swell place, too. With half a dozen less persons around, I'd call it cozy."

"Tell me about it," begged Carrie softly, after a time.

"Ain't a helluva lot to tell. Place they're livin' at would o' been mighty classy if it'd had a couple dozen less grown-ups and young uns. But there was so many it was messy. 'Member I told you about goin' up to David's on Pine Street one night and finding The Ark full o' sausage and onions? Flat to New York was much the same way. Edge took off things, somehow, even that quick. You know how a house can begin to look when they's half a dozen kids around — window curtains pinned up so's the kids can't tear 'em, greasy finger marks here and there on the walls, furniture mended like it'd been busted in a rough house! That was Dave's apartment within twenty-four hours of his gang streakin' in. And about every other piece of furniture looked like a bed. Place had moved in more sofas than Blake Whipple, the housefitter, has got all over his buildin'."

"You ate dinner with them?"

"Naw. Wasn't room for me to the table. When I diet, I gotta have space. But I set and watched — or wandered

around the house. And them women kept tabs on me like I was aimin' to snitch the alarm clocks."

"B-B-But tell me about — David. With all his success, is he happy?"

"With that bunch of spongers? Would a horse be happy if you hitched him to a freight train? Say — how old is David, Carrie?"

"Going on twenty-nine, I believe."

"The boy looks forty. I recall that sickness aged him five years. Now his face is lean as nails. His eyes wore an ugly, sullen look — as though he was presently due to explode or make up his mind to do something desperate. He don't talk — he snaps. And can't sit in one place three minutes."

"Poor Davie!" the girl breathed tremulously.

"Poor goofus! The idea o' lettin' any lazy crowd climb on his back like that! No one to blame but himself. Looked like he was just bein' dragged to a standstill. Told me he thought some of tryin' another play but was worried sick because he felt scrambled. Bothered him a lot, I'd say — more writin'. And The Family just restin' its weight on him. Bet his woman ain't got a dollar out of him since he hit the heights, that her relatives ain't boned away ninety cents. Old Man Haskell come into the 'den' where the boy and I was tryin' to visit. Wanted his hat. Know where he'd hung it — his greasy old sky-piece?"

"I can't imagine."

"Drove a big ugly nail into them delicate gray walls — almost a spike, low down — so's he could reach the hat from his sofa-bed, handy-like. That's The Family! Done crude, mediocre, greasy things all over the six rooms like that within twenty-four hours. No eye for beauty or style. Didn't stay long. Couldn't. Got out by half-past eight."

"Poor Davie!" murmured Carrie again.

"Light hurt my eyes in that 'den.' Asked why they didn't have nice little shades to their lamps and the boy laughed nasty-like. Said the first thing old man Haskell done was to yank the delicate silk shades off most the candelabras because his eyes was poor and he didn't intend to stumble 'round in the dark. Give the place a barren, barnlike look. No home atmosphere. Just a few rooms with swell furniture in 'em. And kids squallin' — Gawd!

Hardly a minute I was in there, the kids wasn't squallin'. Even woke up from their sleep to squall, thinkin' perhaps The Family hadn't got enough."

"But Davie must be making quite a lot of money, isn't he?"

"Hard to say, Carrie. Shouldn't be surprised if he took to runnin' with the women."

A sharp breath from the girl. It was after sunset. Autumn afterglow lighted the room where Jim strode up and down the rug. "You don't really think that, do you, Daddy Jim?" she asked in distress.

"Why not? Got a right to, ain't he? I would myself — with that bunch gummin' the works!"

"Can't the poor fellow get rid of his people and just live normally with his wife and children?"

"Asked him that. He laughed rotten-like. 'Try it,' says he. 'But don't get a woman who's married to her mother instead of her husband — and won't listen to a word bein' spoke against the relatives.'"

"But won't they go when they're *ordered* out?"

"I said something along that order, too. Claimed he was thinkin' about tellin' them and then makin' them do it — only I suppose the provocation ain't quite strong enough yet. Womenfolks that day had been downtown and got an automobile. Give his name and everything, and somehow that Willie-boy come home drivin' it. Had a scene with his folks, Dave had, in consequence — and old lady Parker got her things packed, weepin' all over the place and talkin' about what she'd been through, and somethin' about little birds and now to be talked to so, and not wanted — you know how that kind is. But when it come time to depart, Dave's wife had got right up on them lanky legs of her'n and laid down the law. They'd had a swell fracas and worsted him — David. For the moment, anyhow. Nine against one — why wouldn't they worst him? So the old lady stayed. Why shouldn't she stay? The kid married the tribe."

"I should think he'd get so weary of them, he'd leave."

"Carrie," said Big Jim tactlessly, "why the devil didn't you ever marry Zach Haskell's boy yourself? You come to town with him the same mornin'. There was quite a spell when he was driftin' around pickin' up items about fish.

What'd you ever let him go and get mixed up with that cheap Parker family for?"

"Women don't usually chase after men — to marry them — Daddy Jim."

"That Parker girl did — or so they tell me."

"I'm not the Parker girl, Daddy Jim."

"Well, why didn't you contrive somehow to get him interested in you? I'll swear — I'd been happy to see you two spliced up together. Loved the both of you like kids of my own."

"He didn't want me," Carrie answered after a long and significant silence.

"How'd you know he didn't want you?"

"Because he had the chance to take me all along. But somehow — I guess — I wasn't the girl — he liked!"

CHAPTER XIII

SUCCESS AND THE PRICE

Big Jim had been right. David *was* "being dragged to a standstill." And none of them seemed to realize it but the fellow himself.

He knew that things were all wrong. His nerves were supersensitive, his body soft, his head forever tired; slumber brought him no rest. The ensuing two nights after The Family's arrival he had nightmare: icy hands squeezed his heart at the thought of what would happen in expensive, merciless New York when his lucky dramatic production passed the peak of its patronage and started down the decline to final closing. And the way Allie laughed contemptuously when he tried to show her he might not be able to duplicate his first dramatic effort disclosed the fool's paradise in which she, along with the rest, had arrived to dwell.

"You didn't have any difficulty writing more humorous stories on the *Telegraph* after your first one, did you?" she argued. "If you've proved you can write a successful play once, you've got it in you to do it again. The only trouble with you, David, you're morbid, introspective and inclined to be lazy. You don't get out enough and mingle with the right kind of people; you live too much in yourself. And lacking outside interests, you've nothing to take up your mind but picking on The Family. You see, I understand you far better than you understand yourself."

"Understand me, do you? A lot you understand! I wonder where I'd be if I were married to a woman who really *did* get my angle?"

Allie now received these moods with a patronizing smile. It pleased the woman to think herself the wife of a genius. All artists must necessarily be cantankerous, erratic — part of their creative temperaments. It was the requisite duty of an artist's consort to live above these whimsicalities, treat them as one treats the petulance of a child. Because the

resiliency of youth had always brought her husband out of any such to date, she was positive it would always bring him out. She liked to think herself a balance wheel on his temperamental irresponsibilities. She responded:

"If you mean by a woman who 'gets your angle' a woman like yourself in temperament, I'd pity you, David. You wouldn't live with her a month."

"Wouldn't I, though?"

"No, you wouldn't. The two of you — built alike — would fly to pieces in a fortnight — like a pulley that's driven so fast it simply bursts apart."

"You think so, do you? Precious little you know." And miserably the boy had a recollection of Lillian's clear, deep, sea-green eyes, tender solicitation on her face, her clean-cut vitality, her mental sagacity and intuition. Lillian! Where was she now? What were her thoughts — her memories? *God!*

"A genius like yourself has to have a wife of my disposition — and family responsibilities — to hold him down or he'd land in his grave before he reached forty. You're luckier than you know. Some day, looking back in perspective, you'll realize it."

His judicial mind debated this — gave it serious consideration. But natural instincts, the hunger of his weary heart for privacy and affection, quickly swept aside any weight he found in her argument. And besides — those awful memories of Lillian!

Strange to narrate, not one of The Family except Allie read themselves into his play the following evening, when they had attended in a body. Had they been able to see themselves, they would earlier have seen themselves as they were up in Paris, up in Wickford.

They had all laughed at it — unnecessarily loud — applauded vociferously — and Willie had seemed to believe the aproned girl at the lobby candy stand should supply them with saccharine refreshments gratis on the strength of them being the dramatist's Family. But Allie had been thoughtful all the way home. Just before seeking her bed — with her mother — she had remarked rebukingly to her husband, "It was the funniest thing I ever saw and I'd never believe you could do it. But you crucified your dear ones to write it."

It was her only comment. She never referred to it again.

Yes — his adolescent venture in matrimony was dragging David to a standstill. Gone was his dream of having a cozy home with Allie and his little girls, introducing his wife to the people of his professional acquaintance, chumming around with her, putting money in the bank, getting ahead together.

Gone was his hope of privacy and intimacy and camaraderie and affection. Nothing opened ahead but filling endless reams of paper with words, striking another popular hit — *perhaps* — making money and more money — and letting The Family spend it as they considered they had the perfect right. He had tried desperately to alter it. Now he found he could not. Where was it to end?

Ruthy at once became the arch fiend in proposing ways and means for The Family — through Allie — to enjoy her brother-in-law's sudden opulence. It had been Ruthy who had poked and prodded and incensed Allie into the consciousness of her importance as the wife of a successful young dramatist. It was now Ruthy who at once went "shopping" with her older sister and kept a weather eye peeled for purchasable articles and domestic accouterments that the wife and The Family of a successful dramatist should later annex and enjoy. She made the discovery of how easy it was in the matter of the limousine. Thereafter it appeared the woman started lying awake nights or planned lone scouting trips to dig out possible acquisitions that would deplete David's bank roll.

It was Ruthy who persuaded Allie she went around a frump in her dress and the wife of a "successful young dramatist" ought to tog out like a Christmas tree. So Allie was discovering she needed a twelve-hundred-dollar fur coat — and that mother had to have her aging bones warmed with one costing not a cent less than four hundred and eighty. Ruthy's would come later as David was "brought around" by easy degrees. This the second week in the place — and a whole winter ahead!

Bugs had failed to find David responsive to his sizzling motion-picture project, try as he would. Neither was he able to connect at once with a lucrative position befitting his artistic capabilities. But he shot a beautiful game of Kelly pool and made some small change betting on himself. The Family would always be good for meals and a place to sleep.

Why should he worry and get a wrinkle? He had gone once with Ruthy to look at rooms down on Ninth Avenue, on a level with the Elevated. But Allie's apartment was nicer, even if it were somewhat cramped. They decided to stay there as long as permitted.

Then Ruthy's diabolical brain evolved a scheme.

Her husband had not been able to "sell" David on his film project; might it not be brought about under certain astute duress? Ruthy thought that it might and decided it should. Somehow they had to get their portions of that two hundred thousand dollars. Low voices were therefore heard in the room set aside for the Hinkles far into three nights.

The fourth day Bugs went down into the city with the preoccupation of a man of affairs!

CHAPTER XIV

PAN

David was unable afterward to recall all that transpired in Thornton Starring's office; his rage was too harrowing. Between four and five o'clock of that winter's afternoon, Starring had 'phoned for him to come down directly and the boy had responded with misgiving in his heart. Always when summoned thus, without explanation in advance, he connected it with Lillian. Indeed, he had gone up imagining that all sorts of grievous things had happened to Lillian, for which he would be called to pay. But when Starring had closed the door, seated him and announced the business responsible for the summons, David had been too dumfounded for a moment to do anything but stare.

"Hinkle *what?*" stammered the youthful playwright.

"Just what I told you. And if you can't squelch the thing before it goes one step further, believe me, *I can!*"

"He — hasn't — the — nerve!"

"That sort of thing doesn't take nerve; it takes mental dumbness. But I can't have my name drawn into this fool business and I won't."

"And those Hollywood men are coming on to New York?"

"They would have, if I hadn't stopped them by wire."

"He told them that I was behind him with *your* resources behind *me* — and expected to get away with it — to make it stick?"

"There's the telegrams. Read for yourself."

He was a handsome man, this Starring. He had started his career in stock — as a leading man. Evolving brains, he had come east from San Francisco and begun producing on a small legacy. He was now as big financially as he was physically, with snow-white hair, a clean-shaven face — in which the most prominent feature was a huge hooked nose — cherry black eyes and a flavor about him of fine grooming and finer living. And he had a gracious, diplomatic manner that went with a kindly heart.

All the same, when such a man becomes aroused, he can frequently be dangerous. Starring gave symptoms of becoming dangerous now. As David read the wires from the Coast, demanding confirmation from the producer that he was backing Hinkle and Haskell in the moving-picture version of "How's The Family?", Starring continued:

"If that brother-in-law of yours gets this ballyrot into the papers, a lot of my good movie friends whom I've turned down in the past are going to ——"

"He won't. He must have gone suddenly insane to believe he could rush matters into anything concrete by a maneuver such as this."

"Well, it's up to you to take care of him, David. Before I started anything, I wanted you to have the chance to handle it, out of my friendship for you. Who is this brother-in-law of yours that he should feel himself competent to ——?"

"Don't worry any more about him, Mr. Starring. I promise to curb him — at once."

"Can you?"

David glanced up. Starring was regarding him levelly. The younger man wondered how much the older knew of his domestic complexes.

"Give me twenty-four hours to prove what I can do. I'm pretty near the end of my rope, Mr. Starring. I mean in regard to my wife's relatives. It wouldn't take much of a spark to produce an explosion."

David's hand trembled as he laid the telegrams back on Starring's blotter.

It was nearly seven-thirty when he descended into Times Square. Yet he came down in rebellion now. *He wanted his world to get off his back!*

A band marched through Seventh Avenue playing "Tipperary"; Allied sympathizers were holding a meeting somewhere and attracting a crowd. An army recruiting tent was pitched at Columbus Circle when David reached it, a frontal placard announcing:

ENLIST NOW!

America May Need You!

"If America ever needs me, believe me, she can have me," he told himself dourly. And he continued on uptown. Half-

past eight it was when he reached his apartment on the Drive.

Going up the lift and down the hall, he halted with his hand on the door of his apartment. Someone was weeping inside — sobs that were almost a shriek. He opened the door.

“For heaven’s sake, what’s the matter?”

Allie leaped up. “You’re to go out at once and have that unspeakable Hinkle arrested.”

“I’ll say I am! But — for heaven’s sake, what’s happened *here?*”

“Bugs did it! Look!”

They were striving to hold Ruthy down on the living-room couch. But Ruthy refused to stay on the couch. Ruthy was a woman demented. Her clothing was torn, her hair was down. Worse than all, across her fair Grecian forehead was a grievous bruise. There were more bruises — on her arms — on her knuckles — and blood on her frock.

“I’ll not live with him!” Ruthy was shrieking. “I’ll not live with him another day! I’m done! I’m through! I’ve left him forever and I’ll not go back!”

“There, there!” soothed a strange man — a doctor. “Drink some of this, little woman. You’ll soon feel better.”

“I don’t want to drink any of anything. I don’t want to feel better; I want to feel worse. I want to die — only I won’t because that’s just what he’d like. But I’ll not go back. I won’t live with him another day. I’m done! I’m through!”

“There, there, there!” crooned Mother Parker, striving to get her daughter in her arms.

“For pity’s sake, what’s happened?”

“They had some kind of fight,” answered Allie.

“Was he drunk — Bugs?”

“He hasn’t earned enough to get drunk. He was down-right mean. He was dressing for some sort of pool tournament. He wanted a clean collar. She hadn’t sent his laundry. It was in a newspaper parcel. She said something pert and he lost his temper. He broke the bundle over her head. Look at the floor! That began everything!”

“I should say it had — for Ruthy.”

“He smashed crockery — our crockery — and a chair has gone through the front of the china closet. She fell over little Bertrand and we don’t know yet whether she’s hurt him

or not. My poor little Ruthy! She needs our protection —— ”

“Protection? Blaa!”

“Look at her condition!”

“I’d like to see Bugs!”

“I won’t go!” screamed Ruthy anew. “I stay right here as long as I live. I’d like to know by what right I have a sister with a wonderful home, a limousine, servants, all kinds of money to spend, while I’m asked to coop in a miserable hovel next to the Elevated with scarcely a rag to my back? I stay right here, I say! If she has them, I have them also. I dare you to put me out. I dare you to say I haven’t the right to a beautiful home, to limousines, fur coats, *millions!*” Her voice ended in a shriek — then a gulp. Ruthy was obsessed. Besides, she had almost lost breath.

“That’s all right, darling,” soothed Allie. “You can stay right here as long as you like.”

“I’ve got just as much right as you have,” Ruthy railed on. “I’m the one that ought to have the swell apartment. *I’m* the one that ought to have the limousines. *I’m* the one that ought to have the millions to spend. What do you know about spending money, anyhow? What do you know, I say? What do you know?”

“Nothing, dearie,” acknowledged Allie. “Calm yourself now, honey. You needn’t go back to the brute. I guess sister Allie’s got enough for two. We’ll enjoy it together.”

“I dare you to chuck me out. I dare you to put your own flesh and blood in the street. With a child in my arms, I dare you!”

“Nobody’s going to put you in the street —— ”

“Oh, yes, *somebody is!*” The acrid voice was David’s. “I’m going to put her into the street!”

It was the coddling tenderness which Allie wasted on the spoiled, spleenish, petulant woman that really did the business for the husband. Something snapped in his brain after the strain of the past two hours — and last nine years. Something let in light, made him vision clearly, lifted him into a sweet, wide freedom of grim self-assertion.

“Yes — *somebody is!*” he repeated, backing away from the roomful as though at bay. His tone was terrifying. “Ruth Frances Parker — I’ll give you thirty seconds to stop that

howling or I'll draw cold water and give you a drenching!"

Had David gone insane? The Family thought so. Away from Ruthy it backed. Whereat Ruth sensed they were walking out on her and started to shriek.

Dave did not hesitate. Straight into the kitchenette he strode. Rosy had left a fresh pan of water drawn there for her dishes before she had vanished to look for Bugs. Dave hesitated not a second. He lifted it clear, crashed a cup in the process, stalked back into the living-room.

"Now then — how about it, Ruthy?"

"You dare!" gasped Allie. "You — dare!"

"Get out of my way! I'm the boss here. This is *my* home!"

"It's *my* home, too. This is *my* poor, hurt little sister ——"

"Spoiled, selfish, dirty-tempered little hell-cat! I told her to stop her yowl and I meant what I said. For once in her life she won't get her way with a 'spell.'"

"Hold on a minute!" protested the doctor.

"You get the hell out of here! This woman doesn't need a doctor. She needs a harness tug!"

"You pour water on to me, Dave Haskell ——"

"Will you straighten out?"

The defiant Ruthy began kicking her heels. Thereat Dave let her have it — the whole full dish-pan. Once it might have been warm — even hot. Now it was cold — greasy cold. Over her head and shoulders he drenched it — over her frock and the sofa, on to the walls and partly over Mother Parker transfixed on her knees. It made an awful mess. It was so — *wet!* Ruthy coughed, gasped, sobbed. And became sober.

"I'll have you arrested for ——"

"You'll have me arrested for nothing!" And Dave banged the resonant pan on the table. "You get the hell out!" the infuriated husband warned the physician again.

"What are you going to do?"

"Read this Family the riot act."

Ruthy was a wreck. Her hair was awry and soaked into strings. So was her frock. They couldn't escape by the door, any of them. David blocked it. Allie found her tongue ——

"Grab him, Willie! He's lost his mind!"

"Stay where you are, Willie, or I'll push in your face!"

"Young man—" began Zach.

"For the first time in my life, father, I'm going to ask you to remain silent. Or else go out."

He was interrupted. Some one had entered the flat. It was Rosy. She had Bugs by the collar. "Fetched him!" she announced.

The Lord only knows where she'd bagged him—or how. But she'd done it. And Bugs was penitent—extremely penitent. It made The Family complete.

"He drenched me!" wailed Ruthy, when she saw him.

"He drenched your poor, dear, faithful wife—with water!"

"You close your mouth, Ruth, or I'll do it again. Come in here, you Bugs! I've got something to say that includes you, too!"

Bugs, startled, demurred. Dave hit him on the head with the pan. It resounded with terrific impact—though which was pan and which Bugs' cranium was never determined. Allie gave a little scream. Bugs caromed in, stumbled, fell at the feet of The Family. Mother Parker climbed from her knees with astounding agility. They shrank from the "madman" as far as they could get. Willie wondered if he should open a window and flee down a fire escape. Then he recalled they were all at the back. Only Rosy grinned.

Thus David faced them—faced his *drag* of nine years' standing. He banged the pan again. It got him fearful attention.

"What I've got to say to you," he snarled, "isn't meant for you as individuals. It's meant for you as a Family. For the first time in nine years, I'm going to tell you what I think—inside!"

"Aw—Dave!" began Bugs. He had gained his feet.

"Shut up!" And Dave put another four-inch dent in the pan though not on Bugs' head. He wasn't near enough.

"We're listening—Davie," whimpered Mother Parker.

"In the first place, I want you to get this and get it good—there hasn't been one damned thing any of you have done for me that I haven't appreciated. For every dollar you've spent—every effort you've made—every thought you've expended—my heart has been grateful. And that's not

sarcasm. No! *It's the interest I've paid I'm resenting!*" And this time the bang of the pan sent a fancy dish flying into fragments over Rosy Trotter's lap.

"For I *am* objecting. I'm rising up at last and telling you all I'm done. I'm done paying *interest!*" And once more he crashed the pan. "Father bought a house up in Paris for nine hundred dollars. I've heard nothing but the gift of father's house for a whole decade. Something like two thousand per cent. I've paid for the investment of that nine hundred dollars—and the end not in sight. That's Item One! (Crash of the pan.) Item Two is Little Hank's store ——"

"Don't you call my father 'Little Hank,'" fired Allie. "He's dead!"

"He is. It's too bad. Because if he were here, I might call him something that'd curl his hair. However, I don't mean it disrespectfully. Everybody called him Little Hank. Little Hank he was—even to his wife and girls. That was principally what ailed him. Item Two is Little Hank's store. I married and wedding presents were in order. Little Hank made me a wedding present. He presented me with his store. He didn't give it to me because he loved me. He gave it to me as part of the great American game of passing the buck. It was in debt. He was sick of waiting on trade. He took advantage of my greenness and love for his daughter. Then when I'd straightened things out, he fought me the clock around. About six thousand per cent. I paid as interest on that wedding present! And I object to such *interest!* (Crash of the pan.) That's Item Two!"

"Item Three is my home on Pine Street—Paris. I wanted peace—a little consideration. Instead I got The Family—all of you—dumped on me, hitched to me, like a ten-ton parade. Half a dozen people jammed in my home just because a little business incompetent couldn't keep up his insurance and provide for his family in case of his death. If I wanted to move, get out, get ahead—I could do it with a cloying crowd on my coat-tails—DRAG!"

"I'm done!" roared old Zach. "Right here and now, I'm done! I wash my hands of the whole sordid business! After all I done for you folks, providin' you with a place to live and all, to get no more thanks!—I'm done! I wash my hands of the whole sordid business, I say! I hate New

York, anyhow! It's damp!" And the man pushed past his son, clumped down the hall and out through the door, without his hat.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," wailed Mother Parker, "when little birdies in a nest couldn't *somehow* agree ——"

"Perhaps not, Mother Parker. But you've lived to see the night when the whole thoughtless lot of you are going to get off my back! You're a nice old lady, Mother Parker. Your heart's in the right place. You've done a lot for me and your children. That's been the trouble. You've been willing and ready to do too much! Now one of them's in revolt. I'm sick of paying *interest*!" There seemed to be a strange affinity between the word "interest" and Dave's pan. He whanged it again. And The Family—or what was left of it with Pa Haskell gone—was totally and completely fazed. Never had they seen David in such a rôle. Never had they conceived that David might have a "spell." And what he might not do with that pan!

And he employed that pan to a climax. Every imposition and injustice boiling in his smothered soul for years came out. He reminded them of Jim Thorne's arraignment and its futility; he recalled their opposition to the Wickford project and their conduct after they moved there. He scorched Allie for her mother fixation and Ruthy for her cussedness. He blistered Willie for his mischiefs and Bugs for his general worthlessness. And after every item he crashed that pan. The thing got dented, twisted, opened at the seams. When he reached Allie's nagging correspondence in Springfield, one handle came off. The pan started toward The Family. Ruthy shrieked. David recovered it, and just to make sure the other handle was O.K., he tried what was left of the shapeless, battered, twisted thing again on Bugs' head. The pan seemed O.K. But Bugs' head —— !

"You're a nice old lady, Mother Parker," David concluded, "but when it comes to controlling your children, tutoring your girls in pride, independence, unselfishness, self-control—the *responsibilities of married daughters to their husbands struggling to pay the bills*—your deficiencies have been criminal."

"Don't you *dare* talk to my dear mother so!" screamed Allie. "I'm her daughter ——"

"You're a selfish, indolent, disloyal bundle of aches and worries who intrigued a green country boy into matrimony simply to provide a home for your mother so she could escape from Little Hank. You didn't want a husband. You wanted a habit. You didn't want a man. You wanted a mint. From the night our wedding trip went wrong till the night when you lay with me in a New York hotel bed, you never once let up in your caustic blistering, your attitude of resentment because you were hitched to me. You married under false pretenses because Romance had nothing to do with your choice. Every day and night the past nine years, you've been living a fraud."

"I'll go!" wailed Mother Parker. "I guess I know when I'm not wanted. Out alone in the world ——"

"You're all going out alone in the world — although you may not know it yet. That is, all but Alice and my own two daughters — unless she chooses to stick with her mother. This is my home. My money paid for it. There isn't one of you has a right in any way to one penny I'm making. If you were ill or crippled, any of you, I'd be the first one to help you with all I've got. But you're not ill or crippled. Hereafter every one of you is going to hustle for yourselves. Ruth and Bugs are going to get out — out of this house to-night ——"

"But we've no home or no money!" wailed Ruth.

"That's your funeral! You're of age — married — got a child of your own. Go take care of it. Settle your troubles somewhere between yourselves — not here, smashing up my apartment. As for you, Mother Parker, you've got a grown son. He's single and knows a good trade. Let him take you out and support you ——"

"Kindly remember, David Haskell, these are your relatives as well as mine." Alice was turning a queer drowned green.

"I don't give a hoot whose relatives they are. I'm sick and tired of having them around."

"You insufferable ingrate!"

"I don't care what you call me. I've got beyond caring. I'm sick of you — I tell you! I'm sick of earning money. I'm sick of the grind of being a machine — of having a home that's not a home, nothing but a constant rathole of expense

— I'm sick of the *interest* I've paid for what you've done for me!" And he whanged the pan — or what was left of the pan — three more times crazily.

"It was yourself first proposed having your father come and live with us," screamed Allie. "And if your father was coming, I made up my mind that my mother ——"

"All right — then I ditch my father — he's gone, anyhow — I've done him an injustice. He was a steady, hard-working man before I got married. He had something to take up his mind; he never quarreled with any one. But since he came to live with us, he's changed to a totally different person. Oh, I see it now. He's aged more since my marriage than he'd aged the previous twenty years. And his disposition has been going to whack — just the same as his son's!"

"But I can't keep house alone — without a soul to help me! I've got two children!"

"You'll get rid of your mother ——"

"I'll *not* get rid of my mother! Not for any man living! My mother's done more for me than any person on earth. I'll not throw her over at this late day. You can kick out your father — if you're that kind of child. But so long as my mother lives and I have a home, there's a place beneath its roof for the woman who bore me. Have a couple of children yourself and you'll know what it means."

"All right," snapped David, smashing over a chair, "if that's your final decision, remember you've made it. And don't come whining to me if you find yourself a grass widow."

"I won't find myself a grass widow. No court in this land will uphold a man deliberately asking his wife to chuck out the mother who bore her for the sake of his own selfish hide. I think I'll look after my mother and I think my husband will do his duty! As for my own dear sister — if she wants to stay here, she *will* ——"

"She will not stay here. She'll get out with her husband tonight. You Hinkles — *GET OUT!*"

"David Haskell — if you say another word against my flesh and blood ——"

"To hell with your flesh and blood! That's what's been the trouble with my marriage, your flesh and blood ——" The rest of it was never uttered. Something struck him with

a stunning smack squarely across the mouth — a nasty blow that opened his lip. It was Allie's hand.

Black rage tore through the husband. He dropped the pan. With galvanic muscular action his arms came up — fists on them knotted.

Strike a woman? *David?* His arms went strengthless. He drew a long sobbing sigh.

"All right, Allie," with a sudden weird calm which scared Allie worse than a blow, "if that's your answer, it comes down to this: choose your husband or choose your relatives. It's going to be one or the other — *to-night!* I'm either going to be the husband here or I'm never crossing this threshold again."

"The law will see about that. With all the money you're making — if you think you can skip ——"

"You bet your sweet life the law will see about it! Which is it going to be — your husband or your folks? I'm putting it up to you, Alice. The choice is your own. But once you make it, it's made for all time."

Allie was hysterical — exactly as David had predicted she would be, four years before up in Wickford. As well control a tigress when one maltreats her cubs.

"If you put it that way, you know mighty well what my answer will be!"

"All right. I'm putting it that way. Which is it?"

"My mother comes first!"

"That's final?"

"Do you think I'm cheap enough to desert ——"

But David had no intention of going over that argument again. "All right, Allie. Then we've reached a smash!"

"We haven't reached any smash if you'll be less selfish ——"

David paid her no attention. He kicked the pan with a last dull clatter across the room and under the sofa behind Ruthy's legs. His deadly calm continued. Turning on his heel, with never a backward look, he strode down the hall, opened the door, passed through ——

And was gone!

CHAPTER XV

DISINTEGRATION

It was from Starring that Allie learned what David had done.

Morning found her thoroughly alarmed. Supposing David had meant what he said? Supposing he were gone again — gone permanently this time, despite his interests in New York — despite the deliberate omission of first assigning all his royalties to her so she might live and raise children that were his as much as hers?

The certainty grew upon her as the forenoon passed and noontime came with no word from her husband. Already she regretted her slap of temper. She took all the blame on herself. She had been upset by the sight of Ruthy in such a battered condition, David's tirade, his frightful antics with that pan. And yet, one had to be terribly careful of these geniuses — they were so inhumanly sensitive, so exasperatingly eccentric. She wept and her mother wept and Ruthy wept. Only Rosy Trotter did not weep. Rosy Trotter went phlegmatically about the household heavy work, banged pans herself and clinked the dishes. She paused but once for comment when she said, "Serves you right! — he spoke — truth — you-all don't want — man — you want — a mint."

By three o'clock there was still no word from David and Allie was panic-stricken. Once she felt faint as the idea occurred to her that he'd "made away" with himself — gone down to the Edgewater Ferry perhaps and leaped overboard — walked in front of speeding traffic — jumped before an Elevated train. Right now he might be lying in some hospital or morgue and how would she know? She finally conquered herself, however. David wouldn't do that. Deep in his heart he loved them too much.

But there was no denying he might have fled the city in this latest fit of artistic temperament and left his true and faithful wife to stagger along somehow with eight people to

support and only seventy dollars in her purse. Shifting for themselves down here in this "city where nobody cared" was a manifestly different thing from shifting for themselves up in sleepy little Wickford only a few walking miles from the old home in Paris. The other was inconvenience. This was disaster.

By four P.M. she could stand the strain no longer. She felt certain if David had fled New York he would have made financial arrangements first with Starring or Miss Kramer. She would go down to the producer's office and ask before calling in the police or consulting a lawyer. She had already made errors enough in handling her genius. Now she told herself tearfully she must "watch her step."

The suggestion about a lawyer had been Ruthy's. The sister bitterly regretted her battered condition, else she would have gone along, too, and superintended that search—and arrangements with Starring and Miss Kramer. For a time Ruthy thought she'd better go anyway and invoke public interest in the affair by charging her battered condition up to David. She had to give up that idea because Allie put her foot down on telling falsehoods. Whereat Ruthy called her flabby and a ninny in the gentle art of handling husbands and went for a thirty-mile ride with Willie in the limousine. Allie got Pa Haskell, who had returned for his bags, to accompany her to Starring's and Mother Parker heroically did her bit by staying behind to mind the three children and grieve herself into a splitting headache over that awful prior evening.

Allie and Pa Haskell walked into Starring's office just before five o'clock. Allie's name secured her admittance at once. Pa Haskell remained outside in the anteroom. "Have you seen my husband to-day?" she demanded tartly. "Do you know what's become of him, Mr. Starring?"

"Certainly," answered the producer. "He's enlisted—didn't you know?"

"Enlisted? In what?"

"The United States Army. Aviation corps. For the War in Europe—if we get into it."

Allie clutched the desk-top and stared glassily.

"He 'phoned me about it this morning. He came in around three o'clock to tell me he'd passed his physical examinations. I thought of course he'd told you."

"My husband's — skipped — into the Army?"

"I don't know as I'd say he's skipped. I'd rather say *escaped*." Starring had heard the story of the previous evening — all of it. "Upset, Mrs. Haskell?"

"Where is David now?"

"Gone to Camp Something-or-other. He spoke of being assigned later to Mineola," declared Starring sardonically.

"Did he make any provision for his family while he was at war? Tell you to pay us his money — his royalties?"

Starring shook his head.

"But he hasn't taken a thing with him — his clothes or anything."

"He told me he didn't want to take anything. He said he was done, in so far as it concerned his too-many dependents. He spoke of divorcing you, anyhow."

"Divorcing *ME!* Divor ——"

And then with a wail, she broke down completely.

"But Mr. Starring — we've got no money at home ——"

"Where's all the money that David's been giving you?"

"He's never given us — much."

"Mrs. Haskell — I'm not a fool. And I'm extremely conversant with David's predicament. His domestic drag has sent him into the United States Army on wages of twenty-six dollars a month. I won't say whose fault it is, but he's *in* and won't get out for a couple of years. I suppose you'll have to make the most of it."

"But his royalties on his play ——?"

"I'm under no obligation to pay them to any one but his agent, Miss Kramer."

"He can't flee into the Army and leave his family to starve. I'll bring suit against the government for shielding him."

"Don't be absurd, Mrs. Haskell. Go home and wait until you've got a cool, calm brain. And I guess you won't starve. There's too many of you to starve. The money you can all make together ——"

"You dare to insinuate — with my husband's play running successfully on Broadway — that his lawful dependents must *go to work*?"

"If it comes to that, I'd say it was the luckiest thing that could happen to his 'lawful dependents'."

And Starring bowed her from his office with a smile.

Allie came home a broken woman. Yet not wholly broken. "Where's mother?" she demanded of Rosy.

"Out! — Splittin' headache — wanted air — gone to Park."

"Go fetch her back."

"Won't!" announced Rosy. "Fetch her yourself."

"You're a servant and dependent in this house. You do as I tell you!"

"Ain't!" retorted Rosy and she banged a new dish-pan on the floor and stepped in it as she trundled, proudly past Allie and headed down the hall to her room.

With a despairing realization that they were all turning against her after all she'd done for them, Allie collapsed on a wooden chair. Regardless of her luxurious coat she laid her arms down on the greasy table-top and sobbed for several minutes. She was aroused by the entrance of Ruthy and Willie, their faces flushed by their ride through the invigorating autumn air.

"Oh — you're back!" cried Ruthy. "Did you find him?"

Allie straightened. Face awash with tears, she blew her nose forlornly. "I found what's become of him, anyhow. He's joined the Army."

"What?" Ruthy's face blanched. "Really?"

"He's going to be an aviator."

"No!"

Willie came up, his eyes equally round. "Cripes!" he ejaculated. "Maybe it means — *now we can have an airplane!*"

His elder sister sprang up. "It means, you lazy young loafer, you get a job and go to work."

"Me? Work? Aw — I can't work. I'm susceptible to lung trouble. I've grown up too fast. The doctor said so — you know what he told Maw."

"Then you'll get lung trouble and die. But first you'll go to work."

Ruthy was truly alarmed. "But why's he got to go to work, Allie? They haven't closed David's play, have they?"

"No — but I may have a lot of litigation making Dave give us what we need to live. He's gone somewhere to join an army camp right this very afternoon. Mr. Starring said so. And he's talking about getting a divorce."

"A divorce! *David?* What for?"

"Incompatibility, I suppose. That's what it's usually called when a man gets sick of his wife."

"But he can't skin out and leave us like this. There are laws against it."

"I know that I'm here in New York City with this expensive apartment and about sixty-eight dollars to my name. And if David puts up a fight — on account of you all — it may mean disaster."

"But you got this swell furniture and the car and your coat and everything. You can borrow on them. I'll see to it myself —"

"You'll do nothing of the sort. If you'd kept your nose out of my affairs, Ruth Parker, maybe he'd never have enlisted at all."

This stopped Ruthy for a moment. The *fear* clutched at her vitals also. If her sister should turn against her, where indeed would she be herself? As between a "scene" and diplomacy, the honors went to diplomacy. "But Allie — we got to live somehow."

"You've got a husband. *I'm* the one that's got the load."

"I haven't got a husband. I've got no one but a worthless, low-down, check-passing bum!"

"Oh, yes, you have. And you'll go to him and he'll support you. Do you think for a moment that if I'm cut adrift without money down here in this terrible city I'm going to have you on *my* back?"

"Allie Parker, I think this horrible calamity has driven you out of your mind."

Allie arose combatively and slipped from her coat. She hung it in the hall closet. "Then you'll starve. But you too will get a job and go to work. Or I'll have you jailed as a vagrant."

"But I can't work. I'm too delicate to work. Besides, I don't know any kind of work and I'm burdened with a baby."

Allie was really enraged at what she chose to believe her own helplessness. Ruthy offered a convenient victim. "All right," she retorted — the first time in her life she had ever employed such a tone to her sister — "choke the baby and go learn some work. But I'm sick of having you run my affairs."

"I can run them a darned sight better than you. The trouble is, you haven't let me run them enough."

This astounding turn of events was interrupted by the appearance of Rosy in her best clothes and "fried-egg" hat. She had a telescope bag on one arm.

"Where are *you* going?" demanded Allie.

"Out. Done! Met David this mornin' — told me — wasn't comin' back — divorcing you — alimony — twenty dollars a week — good-by!"

"Rosy! You take off your hat and help me get supper —"

"Get your own supper — earn my own money — won't be a drag on nobody." And with wooden face set rigidly ahead, Rosy quitted the Haskell household forever.

CHAPTER XVI

KISMET

On the Mineola flying-field the third week of David's training, the accident occurred.

David never knew how it happened, anyhow. It was really the fault of the instructor in the forward seat. But they felt themselves going down "nose first." So swiftly it came up — the ground — that the awful explosion broke in Dave's brain almost before he was aware the plunge was not a part of the flight.

Across the turf a dozen officers came running — and men in overalls whose face grease did not hide their pallor. The plane was in flames by the time they came up. But a little way ahead, where he had been thrown by the impact, was the pupil-flyer. The instructor was dead.

"My God — it's young Haskell! Dam' fine boy, too. He's dead. No, he ain't. His heart's still going. But he sure is — busted."

David *was* "busted." He opened his eyes once as they were bearing him as tenderly as possible across the field to the hospital. "It's — quite all right," he murmured. "Sort of superfluous — I've been. It's quite — all right."

"Ballyrot! Carry him more carefully, fellows. That left leg looks queer."

They bore him into the hospital and a dozen nurses scurried to help with a cot. Hours and hours afterward — only a twinkling to David — the embryonic birdman opened his eyes.

"It's — quite — all — right. Nobody to really care ——"

"But there is somebody to care, dear David. *I* care!"

He opened his eyes wider. He stared transfixed. Was Carrie bending above him? Of course not. All a delusion. Carrie was up in Springfield — up in Paris — up to Thorn Hedge ——

"Every time — get sick — find you — bending over me," the man whispered. "Wish it were true — *this* time."

"But it is true, David dear. It is true. It's — Carrie Flynt!"

Dully the fellow gaped. Then he reached out his hand and touched her arm. It was true.

"Oh, Carrie!" he cried so softly, huskily, no one but the girl in the Red Cross uniform above him heard.

"It's queer, Davie, how our lives just naturally keep together. I didn't ask to be sent here — to nurse on this field. I just *was*! And all along it's been like that. We came into Paris — the first morning — remember?"

His face was awash with tears. "Can I ever forget?"

Again his hand touched her. This time it stayed. It stayed with a grip so intense she winced with the pressure. But the Little Toy Lady did not mind — even as Lillian who had also loved a man — this man — had not minded. And all was well.

"Am I — badly hurt, Carrie dear?"

"You're badly hurt — yes. But you'll fly again. Your legs won't keep you from *that*."

"Write Allie, — tell her."

"I sent a wire to her, David. But she's gone. She's given up the Riverside apartment Mr. Thorne told me about, and — gone."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know."

"Carrie — there's nobody left — but you, Carrie!"

"I'll try, Davie dear, to make it enough."

"You love me, Carrie? After the way I neglected you — ?"

"If I hadn't found you like this — there'd never have been any other man."

"I'm tired, Carrie. Terribly tired!"

"Then sleep. I'll stay with you and keep watch while you do."

"You'll be here — when I — wake up?"

"I'll always be at your side — when you wake up," she faltered. In softer tone she added, "if you want me, David."

CHAPTER XVII

THE BIRDMAN

Within two months America had declared war on the régime of the German Kaiser.

It was a time of feverish strain in the country's newspaper offices, no less so than in the country's government. In those months of the eventful spring of 1917 all of us on the *Daily Telegraph* were too concerned with the tremendous events transpiring at home and abroad, all of which had to be recounted in the columns of our paper nightly, to pay much attention to the vicissitudes of local individuals. This held true even regarding those outside the confines of this specific history.

I recall that I heard unofficially that Zachary Haskell had returned to Foxboro Center, where he had invested in a cooper's shop. But what was happening to David, Allie, Ruthy and the Haskell-Hinkle children remained a closed volume until long after the operation of the selective draft. Even David didn't write to me—which was strange, I thought, when I stopped to give it thought at all.

It was not until the following July that I learned all the missing details I have dramatized in the foregoing pages. Then one afternoon our paper carried an item concerning him vitally. I believe Jim Thorne met Sam on the street and gave him its salient data. I did not see it until I read it in the paper:

Word arrived in town by telegraph this morning that David Haskell, former reporter on this newspaper and for some months partner in a small department store in Cross Street, will visit friends here *en route* from Plattsburg to Washington, a brief furlough having been accorded him following a trip to Plattsburg by airplane with army officials.

As was announced in these columns several months ago, young Haskell voluntarily enlisted in the U. S. flying forces in October last, and, barring one initial crash which kept him two months in the hospital, developed into such a clever flyer that

after receiving his "wings" he was assigned to Mineola as instructor and later transferred to Washington for official duties of a more important nature.

His plane will probably land on the stretch of meadow behind Preston Hill some time to-morrow afternoon and while in Paris he will be the overnight guest of Mr. James Thorne. Paris has never ceased to be proud of this local boy's achievements, as prior to the outbreak of hostilities he had written a play of New England country life which ran to packed houses for nine months in New York and Chicago.

So David was returning to Paris after a three-year absence in the romantic rôle of birdman from the clouds!

I went back to the newspaper plant after supper next night. Shortly after eight o'clock the screen door slapped sharply, following a little excited murmur of the crowd around the bulletins. I heard a heavy tread across the floor—a tread with a limp. I turned and looked out.

A fellow stood in my office that sent cold blood fanning down my back, leaving a smear of goose pimples. David!

He was taller, somehow—although it might have been his helmet. He had taken on weight—firm, hard flesh that made shoulders and torso twice burly in the leathern coat unbuttoned at his throat and yanked back carelessly upon a blacksmith's chest. He was poised, erect; despite the temporary limp, his cordy legs had an agility I had never known before in David. If he were to climb in over a window ledge now, I felt certain he would negotiate it without knocking down files. But it was his face and manner that held me transfixed.

He was bronzed like an Indian; the hectic, worried expression had gone from his eyes. They were clear, far-seeing, stoically calm—the variety of eyes I had noticed in the face of that aviator in Springfield the day of Lillian's appearance. In vain I looked for the corn-fed country candor that had been on his features the day he had told Sam Hod how cheerfully he would accept our eighteen a week. Not that there was anything vicious on that countenance now. It was simply—*hard*. Lean and hard, audacious, defiant. The Moving Finger had written on it indeed. And what it had written could never be erased.

"Hello, Bill, old sport!" he greeted me in quiet amusement.

"David Haskell! If this is what the War does to fellows like you, I'm for the Kaiser — strong!"

He looked about the office. "Same old place, eh?" he said whimsically. I noticed when he felt for cigarette components, the backs of his hands were brick-red.

"The same old place, Dave. Only you have changed."

"Have I, Bill? Thank God for that."

A small crowd which had recognized him was pulling and pushing toward the screen door. "Come inside out of range," I invited. "My son, I'm overwhelmed."

His personality brought something into my dingy, stuffy office that had never been there before — that has never been there since. It was immensity. He carried with him the flavor of the skies. His army-trained body, encased in leather, was perturbingly elemental.

"Ten years ago!" he said softly, as he looked around. "It seems a lifetime."

To him perhaps. But not to us. In the center of the place he stood, putteed legs wide apart, leathern coat unbuttoned because of the warmth of the night, helmet pushed slightly backward as he finished the rolling of the cigarette. And the inner office was too small for him. He gave the impression of an eagle in a soap-box.

"David," I said frankly, "you're immense! You look as if — you'd found yourself."

"Perhaps I have."

"Well," I demanded, pulling out chairs, "how's all The Family?" I couldn't help saying it. We say it to everybody. For the moment I forgot that this man's family had been different from other families.

"Let's talk about something else besides me and that blankety-blank *Family*!" he snapped.

He lit the cigarette, tossed his helmet onto the green box safe and threw off the jacket. He sat on the same chair at the same exchange table he had occupied a decade before when he told me about the Azoic rocks. A hand like a talon pawed through the old familiar exchanges. I fancied they brought a mist to his eyes.

"Well, well, well," he sighed. "It's good to be back, even for one night. Got a copy of the *Wickford Times*? Who runs it now?"

"Sam's oldest boy. That's it in the salmon-colored wrap-

per. Making quite a go of it. Is married. Got a family."

"There never was any reason why a half way capable business man couldn't make a go of it. That is—if he hasn't got *too much* family."

David tore off the wrapper and spread the prosperous little sheet before him. He forgot to smoke as the familiar names and advertisements stirred bitter-sweet recollections. I saw him bite hard on a doughty lip. He threw the paper aside after a while and brought others from the pile. He hoisted oaken legs on the table's edge. I hunted matches and prepared my pipe. I knew he would talk—if I gave him time. "Well," I sighed, "we seem to be in the War—head, neck and shoulders."

"And presently in to the ankles—wrong end up."

"You'll be going across, I expect."

"No," he said stoically. "They're keeping me in America. Instructor." He sighed and turned the newspaper. "Bill—it occurs to me it must be exactly ten years ago this week that I came down from Foxboro with Carrie Flynt and got my first job in this office. Gad, what a goof I was in those days! *What* a goof!"

"Yes," I laughed. "I recall you sat in that very same chair and told me you wanted to live through all kinds of experiences—taste every evil and temptation—just to know how they feel and speak of them from sensation."

I thought I heard him groan. "Sometimes I feel," he answered reverently, "that Kismet took me at my word."

"You've rounded off a few corners since those days, son."

"Or had them hacked off with an ax."

I was impatient. I wanted to know about The Family. "I haven't seen you," said I, "since the week of the aviation meet in Springfield. Do you stop to realize it?"

"Yes. Lots has happened since then. What?"

"I have your letters, of course. Jim Thorne has kept me posted. But most of my news has come second-handed."

And then gradually we worked into it. He told me about the autumn of writing his play, of Lillian's appearance in his room when she left him the bank notes. Coming to that following Christmas he told me of his experiences with her again. He talked rather brokenly, intermittently, here. In places I had to employ my intuition.

All this took time—a long time. Half-past eight came.

Nine o'clock. Ten. Frequently we were interrupted by people who wanted to get into the office. David had to meet these "I knew him when" folks who had heard of his arrival. But eleven o'clock found him much of his old boyish self, narrating to me his experiences with his over-stuffed Family. And yet beneath his narrative ran a vein of gentle humor I could not miss. He had himself in command now. Command and perspective. And yet there were moments when his voice sounded bitter, the sort of bitterness that pinches the heart.

"And so when it was up to Allie to support the lot of 'em, she lost her altruism, did she?" I finally summarized. "She was perfectly willing to be magnanimous at the expense of your energy but when it came to filling your shoes, she discovered a back loaded down with Family wasn't so pleasant?"

He shrugged his big shoulders. "She cut 'em off quick enough, anyhow. Zowie! But it wasn't an ace to the way she took on when she'd learned I'd crashed in my first flying accident."

"What do you mean? I hadn't heard."

"Just to prove how much she really *did* love me, I had Carrie fix up a little drama wherein I was rolled out, ostensibly 'crippled for life'."

"You mean — ?"

"She carried on woefully for a while, demanding of the Almighty — and her mother who was with her like a shadow — why she must have a crippled husband 'chucked onto her after all she'd been through.' You should have seen her face *when I got from that wheeled chair with as good a pair of legs beneath me as I've got to-night.*"

"What happened?"

"Wanted to make it all up, of course. Claimed she was sorry and all the old excuses. But I'd gotten my eyes opened. No sacrificing Carrie as I sacrificed poor Lillian. Nothing doing. By the time my enlistment's over I'll be a free man in more ways than one. Then, by gad, I'm marrying the girl I should have married in the beginning. God bless her! She's a brick!"

"How about the rest of The Family?"

"Well — Rosy's running a chicken farm over in Jersey. Doing pretty well, I understand. Willie ran away with a servant girl who lived below us on the Drive and married

her. Took her out to California somehow; I think he got a slice of the money Allie realized on the limousine. Anyhow, he's driving a Hollywood taxi and will probably have to go to France. You knew Pa was over in Foxboro. I'm going over before I leave, to see him."

"How about Ruthy and her vaudeville sketch?"

"Funny thing — Bugs actually found a berth doing a juggling act on the small time. Makes pretty good money, though, I understand. Ruthy helps him."

"Ruthy *what*?"

"Helps him. Seems to suit her first-rate, too. She hands him things and parades up and down in tights."

"By the Great Horned Spoon!"

"Yep — Ruthy's an actress and shows her shape brazenly in the name of Art. And it gives her inferiority complex exactly the exercise it needs. The idea horrified her at first and nearly wrecked her mother. Then Ruthy discovered she liked all men's eyes upon her so. Besides, it permitted her to travel. She bosses Bugs around pretty stiff — but they're hitting it off and their kid's in rompers."

"And Mrs. Parker is still with your ex-wife?"

"You bet! They're running a teahouse on Long Island together. Supporting themselves while Allie teaches the girls to hate me for the way I failed them as a father. I wasn't domestic!"

"Well, David, you've certainly crammed quite a lot into the past ten years."

"Yes," he ruminated, "quite a lot. I've tasted failure and I've tasted success. I've been poor as Job's turkey and now I have all the money I want. I've been single and I've had a Family. I've been used to pull domestic chestnuts out of the fire and I've got a woman to really love me. Furthermore — I've never forgotten the two hundred millions of years when nothing lived on this earth but beetles and reptiles. That last has buoyed me up on a thousand nights when no one knew anything about it."

"What has it all made you — a cynic or a philosopher?"

"More of a humorist than ever, I guess, Bill," he grinned. "And a trifle of both. A little of both never hurts any man. Keeps his bump of selfishness reasonably wholesome and working — at least so he doesn't injure others by being too generous."

The clock crept around to midnight and still we were talking. Making aimless marks on Sam's copy paper, he finally concluded:

"I've come to believe, Bill, that the whole Parker tribe were only deficient self-expressionists. Proper self-expression. The older I grow, the more I'm convinced that the whole world is suffering grievously from this same inability to *intelligently* express its individuality. We don't want less selfishness or more generosity to-day — though we always need rigorous discretion. But better training in intelligent self-expression will cure our inferiority complexes and curb both generosity and selfishness which raises most of the hob on this earth."

"Yet likewise makes for achievement. Don't forget that."

"The Parker children had no normal, intelligent direction or outlet for that blind urge for self-expression. I mean training. They were stifled from the first by their parents — possessed of the faults of their parents because of the stifling of their parents before *them*. Their training was solely in repressions. And repressions are always social timidity in action — "Don't" signs set up along the pathway by other timid souls in turn who ever used negation to mark their own woeful lack of intelligent self-expression."

Well, we finally got up. It was almost midnight and Putney Square was deserted. David donned his leathern jacket and picked up his helmet, striding out before me to the street.

"I'm hungry," he announced. "I see Farrell's place is open."

"Yes," I laughed. "The 'Prop.' still eats at his own café."

"Sounds good to me. Suppose we do likewise."

Our entrance into the place caused a quick bumble of excited comment. Ned Farrell — fatter than ever and blazing with diamonds on very greasy hands — moved forward as of yore to serve us. He was wiping those hands on an old apron, greasier still. He greeted David in a far different manner than on that momentous morning, ten years bygone. He was even offensively effusive — as though he had been David's patron throughout.

"Hustle along some ham and eggs," the bronzed bird-man ordered curtly.

While the succulent potions of hog and hen were writhing on the griddle, I saw David inventorying the place with sorrowful countenance. The boxes of cereals still ranged along the shelves. He saw the same old fly-speckled mirror hung with pink netting, the coffee urns, the rows of catsup bottles beside the register, the advertisement for somebody's cheeses above it. It only needed poor frowsy little Lillian to make the setting complete. Even Chick Jennings came in as we waited — without David seeing him at the moment — and strode across to a table along the side windows. He was a father now and so was Rafferty. A little town doesn't alter much with the passing of years.

Somebody started snoring heavily in the back of the restaurant. David turned in amusement at first. It was old Jeek Whalen. The father was present, if not the daughter. I marveled.

David's heavy, characterful face tightened a moment. His eyes took on a peculiar look. Old Jeek was as big and filthy as ever. He still drank to excess and his stomach did not seem to mind. Long greasy black hair fell down over a wilted collar as he swayed in drunken lethargy above a wedge of pie. He had the same spidery aspect.

"You never heard what became of Lillian?" I asked.

"I — never — heard, Bill," Dave answered. And his voice was mellow.

"She never wrote to you again?"

"Never a word. But wherever she is — she's making good. I feel it."

"You speak as though you regretted ——"

"That I didn't marry her? No! Carrie was slated for me from the first. She's the best thing that's ever come into my life ——"

"Then what do you regret?"

"That finally — in the very last week of my contact with Lill — somehow — I didn't — play the game!"

Our ham and eggs arrived and we ate. The moment my birdman removed his helmet he didn't look so much like a birdman. Comment died down. The "Prop" came forward.

"'Member the first day you come into this place, Dave?" he suggested, leaning his forearm on the oilcloth counter.

"You ordered ham and eggs that morning, too. And Lill Whalen pulled out your tie."

"At your instigation."

"It was all in fun."

"I remember it. You think I could ever forget it?" Dave's voice was suddenly hard.

"Poor Lill! She was a tough one. But she come to a rotten end — like most of 'em do."

"Also at your instigation. Or fellows like you."

Ned felt he was not quite in favor and flushed. "No offense, Davie. No offense!"

"Well, Prop, how much do I owe you?" the birdman asked at length, our nocturnal lunch finished and both of us arising.

"Ham and eggs is fifty cents, same as it allus was," the owner responded. "I'm runnin' one o' them places that ain't shot up prices on account of the War."

"That's a dollar for Bill and myself, is it?" Dave computed, rolling a cigarette.

"And ten cents each for the coffee, brings the bill to a dollar-twenty."

"Let's see — and ten years ago I ate a platter of ham and eggs in here as you just remarked. With coffee that morning, that adds sixty cents more. A dollar-eighty in all. Also I believe I broke a ninety-cent square of glass in your cigar case, getting out. Not much more than that, was it?"

Farrell stared, but he nodded.

"And a dollar-eighty and ninety cents makes a grand total of two-seventy. And two-seventy from five dollars leaves a little matter of two dollars and thirty cents change."

"Change!" roared the proprietor. "Hey! *Wait!* What's the big idea?"

"I'll show you."

David leaned over the counter and reached the cash register on the shelf. He punched a key and the drawer shot out. He took out a two-dollar bill, a quarter and a nickel.

"The big idea? You've been owing me change from my first five-dollar note a darned long time. Something like two dollars interest my change has earned in the past decade. But I'm generous. You can keep that interest in return for your charity to Lillian. Got any objections to this squaring up?"

Farrell would as soon have tackled a hurtling locomotive as this muscular aviator who could have eaten him at a bite.

"N-N-Not in the s-s-slightest, Davie. I'm — much obliged."

"Come on, Bill. He claims he's grateful, so that squares *that!*"

"Who in thunder's that handsome brute?" I heard some one gasp, as we started toward the door.

Farrell moved down behind his counter and closed his cash drawer.

"Feller by the name of Haskell," he retorted savagely. "Come over from Foxboro. Used to be a journalist."

"Journalist!"

"Yeah!" Then as the screen door closed with a slap behind us, Ned's parting shot came out to the walk, "Claims to know humor in all its branches!"

THE END

